

LETTER FROM JESUS' BROTHER  
The Book of James

by

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## **LETTER FROM JESUS' BROTHER**

### **The Book of James**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The “brothers of the Lord” are a distinct and identifiable group in the early church (Ac. 1:14; cf. Mk. 3:31//Mt. 12:46//Lk. 8:19; Mk. 6:3//Mt. 13:55; Jn. 2:12). Though initially they found it hard to believe in the messiahship of their older brother, Jesus (Jn. 7:5), after Easter they emerged as important leaders in the early Christian community (1 Co. 9:5). The most natural reading of the word “brothers” is that they were sons of Mary and Joseph, living in the family home at Nazareth and accompanying Mary when she went to the wedding at Cana (Jn. 2:12). Indeed, Jesus is called Mary’s “firstborn son” (Lk. 2:7), which suggests that she had other children later. That Joseph was fully united with Mary as his wife in a conjugal relationship after the miraculous birth of Jesus also seems clearly implied (Mt. 1:25). This view, the so-called Helvidian view (after Helvidius), is commonly accepted among evangelical Protestants.

The biblical cumulative evidence notwithstanding, there are other views—that the “brothers” of Jesus were either older sons of Joseph from a former marriage or else cousins from another branch of the family. The Epiphonian view (after Epiphanius) is that Joseph was married previously and had children by that union. These children were the so-called “brothers” of Jesus. This understanding was widely accepted in the first three centuries of the church (though Tertullian dissented). The apocryphal gospels suggest that Joseph was over 80 years old when he married Mary, and the other children from his first marriage were older than Jesus. This view is generally followed in the Eastern Orthodox Church. If so, then the “brothers” of Jesus were not his blood relatives. The third view, the Hieronymian Theory (after Jerome), is that Jesus “brothers” were cousins. It is largely upheld in the Roman Catholic communion. Here, the term “brother” is understood in the

broader sense of kinsman. Accordingly, they were blood related to Jesus though not the children of either Joseph or Mary. Rather, they are believed to have been children of Clopas (Jn. 19:25), the husband of Mary's sister. This sister also is described as the mother of James and Joseph (Mt. 27:56), and later, the mother of James, the younger, and of Joses and Salome (Mk. 15:40). What is not clear in this theory is that the wife of Clopas was Mary's sister, and indeed, in John 19:25 some translations, by the way they punctuate the sentence, suggest a differentiation (so NIV, NRSV, RSV, NASB, NKJB, NAB). The ambiguity of John 19:25 is whether there were four women or three standing near Jesus' cross. Regardless of the ambiguity, it would seem a bit unusual for two sisters both to be named Mary if this theory is to be accepted. It is likely that the two theories in which the "brothers" were not sons of Mary owes more to the attempt to protect the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary than anything else. In the end, the conclusion that Jesus' "brothers" were sons of Joseph and Mary after the birth of Jesus seems the most tenable.<sup>1</sup>

## James, the Brother of Jesus

One of these brothers, James, emerges as a significant leader in the Jerusalem church, both in the Bible as well as in extrabiblical texts.<sup>2</sup> Though at first he was not a believer, as mentioned above, he was privileged with a special appearance of the risen Christ after Easter (1 Co. 15:7). When Peter had been released from prison, he urged that James be informed (Ac. 12:17). When Paul went to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter, he also saw James (Ga. 1:19). James seems to have presided over the Jerusalem council regarding the question of circumcision (Ac. 15:13ff.). When the Jerusalem church sent a delegation to Antioch, they were said to have come from James (Ga. 2:12). When Paul went to Jerusalem at the conclusion of his third missions tour, he reported to James (Ac. 21:18). Hence, when Paul speaks of James as a "pillar" in the Jerusalem church (Ga. 2:9), he is only expressing what was generally well known.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> H. Jacobs, *ISBE* (1979) 1.551-552.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, there is some ambiguity in that three individuals named James were among the early Christian leaders. Two of the twelve apostles were named James, James bar Zebedee and James bar Alphaeus (Mt. 10:2-3//Mk. 3:16-18). Though some ambiguity remains between these references and the later references in the New Testament to James the Lord's brother, James bar Zebedee died a martyr's death quite early (Ac. 12:2), so he cannot be the one who emerged as a leader in the Jerusalem church. Though debated, James bar Alphaeus probably achieved no role that merited special attention either.

<sup>3</sup> F. Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James & John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 86-93.

Along with the details about James in the New Testament, his name also appears in early Christian, Jewish and Gnostic texts. Eusebius (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries), citing the tradition of Hegesippus (2<sup>nd</sup> century), confirms that James, a Nazirite, was the leader of the Jerusalem church and frequented the temple, where he interceded for the salvation of his own Jewish people, so much so, that “his knees became hard like those of a camel”. In AD 62, when James’ preaching of Christ resulted in many Jewish conversions, his enemies among the scribes and Pharisees threw him from the temple corner after which he was stoned and clubbed to death while praying for their forgiveness.<sup>4</sup> Josephus says:

*Ananus (the high priest) ...assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned. (Antiquities 20.9.1).*

In the *Coptic Gospel of Thomas* (Logion 12), the disciples asked Jesus who was to be their primary leader after his departure, and Jesus is said to have responded that it was to be “James the righteous, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being”.

## **The James Ossuary**

Recently, much attention has focused upon James the brother of Jesus because of the ossuary which may have been his. Rarely does a matter with biblical import make the front page of *The New York Times*, but the discovery in Jerusalem of an ossuary bearing the name of "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus" did just that in late October 2002 and was reprinted in newspapers across the United States and the world.

The James ossuary probably was found in Jerusalem or nearby, but its precise provenance is unknown. Andre Lemaire, a French scholar from the Sorbonne and one of the world's foremost epigraphers, was invited to examine it in the summer of 2002. Immediately, he recognized its significance and began procedures for ascertaining its authenticity. What set this ossuary apart, of course, was its inscription of 20 Aramaic letters on one of the long sides of the box:

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<sup>4</sup> *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.4-6, 14-18.

יעקוב בר יוסף אחוי דישוע

*Ya'akov bar Yosef akhui diYeshua* (James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus)

Samples examined by The Ministry of National Infrastructures Geological Survey of the State of Israel led to an initial conclusion, "No evidence that might detract from the authenticity of the patina and inscription was found."<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, however, the Israel Antiquities Authority announced in June 2003 that it had concluded the inscription was a forgery.<sup>6</sup> This began a torturous series of acrimonious accusations, arrests and a court trial for forgery that occupied the next several years.<sup>7</sup> By October 2008 and after nearly a four-year trial in the Israeli courts, the prosecution's case began to unravel for lack of evidence one way or another.<sup>8</sup> By February 2010 the testimony finally ended (testimony transcripts exceeded 11,000 pages) with a final verdict to be announced in approximately October 2010. At the end of the prosecution's presentation, the presiding judge suggested to the prosecution that they drop the case.<sup>9</sup> Currently, the issue of the ossuary's authenticity is unresolved, though the majority of scholars at the Jerusalem forgery conference in January 2007 lean toward authenticity.

Committed Christians do not need a bone box with a name on it to assure them of the historical reality of either James or Jesus. For them, the testimony of the New Testament is quite sufficient. However, the James ossuary bears upon the old question relating to the precise relationship between Jesus and James, which in turn bears upon the question of Mary's virginity. The James ossuary, if authentic, strengthens the view that James

<sup>5</sup> A. Lemaire, "Epigraphy--and the Lab--Say It's Genuine," *BAR* (Nov/Dec 2002), pp. 28-29.

<sup>6</sup> H. Shanks, "The Storm Over the Bone Box," *BAR* (Sep/Oct 2003), pp. 26-38.

<sup>7</sup> The details of this debacle can be traced in a series of articles and updates: A. Lemaire, "Ossuary Update: Israel Antiquities Authority's Report on the James Ossuary Deeply Flawed," *BAR* (Nov/Dec 2003), pp. 50-59, 67, 70; J. Harrell, "Final Blow to IAA Report," *BAR* (Jan/Feb 2004), pp. 38-41; H. Shanks, "Ossuary Update: The Seventh Sample" *BAR* (Mar/Apr 2004), pp. 44-47; H. Shanks, "Lying Scholars?" *BAR* (May/Jun 2004), pp. 48-57, 62; H. Shanks, "Three New Rumors," *BAR* (Jul/Aug 2004), pp. 48-51; H. Shanks, "Too Much Booze Nabs Golan as Forger" and "Who is Oded Golan?" *BAR* (Sep/Oct 2004), pp. 54-56; H. Shanks, "The End of the Line," *BAR* (Nov/Dec 2004), pp. 53-59; H. Shanks, "Was Cleanser Used to Clean the James Ossuary Inscription?" *BAR* (Jan/Feb 2005), pp. 54-57; H. Shanks, "The Other Shoe: Five Accused of Antiquities Fraud," *BAR* (Mar/Apr 2005), pp. 58-61; H. Shanks, "Israeli Prosecutor Repudiates IAA Report on Forgery," *BAR* (May/Jun 2005), pp. 46-47; A. Lemaire, "Engraved in Memory," *BAR* (May/Jun 2006), pp. 52-57.

<sup>8</sup> H. Shanks, "Forgery Case Collapses," *BAR* (Jan/Feb 2009), pp. 12-13.

<sup>9</sup> Why would the prosecution continue pressing the case when the judge advised that it be dropped? Possibly because a withdrawal would be more humiliating from a public relations points of view than to announce that the judge decided the prosecution failed to prove its case, cf. *BAR* (May/June 2010), pp. 16-17.

was the younger half-brother of Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary, and it weakens the alternative views. It might permit the theory that the "brothers" were children of Joseph by a former marriage, though this would not be the most natural way to read the inscription. It sounds a death knell, however, to the "cousin" theory, since James is directly cited as the son of Joseph.

## The Author

Was this James, “the Lord’s brother”, the author of the New Testament letter bearing the name of James? The fact that the letter begins by designating the sender as simply “James”, or more precisely “Jacob” (1:1), suggests that he was well-known to his recipients and may have been well-known among the early Christians generally. While it is possible that the author may have been a James other than the brother of Jesus, most scholars conclude that James the brother of the Lord is the most likely candidate to have had sufficient authority, recognition and longevity to be so named at the head of the letter.<sup>10</sup> There are plausible reasons for this conclusion. The author still is calling the church a “synagogue” (2:2), which would be compatible with an early date before James’ death in AD 62. The letter seems obviously written by a Jewish person, and various Hebraisms appear, such as Elijah “prayed with prayer” (5:17). This is the syntax of Hebrew, not Greek. Additionally, he addresses his readers as the Jewish *Diaspora* (1:1). His familiarity with the Hebrew Bible is apparent in the illustrations he uses. Hebraic expressions, such as, “Lord of Sabaoth” (5:4), more naturally would come from a Jew rather than a Greek. The parallels of vocabulary between James’ speeches in Acts and passages in the letter are striking.

ἐπισκέπτεσθε = to “visit” (Ac. 15:14; Ja. 1:27)

ἐπιστρέφειν = to “turn” (Ac. 15:19; Ja. 5:19-20)

τηρεῖν (or διατηρεῖν) ἑαυτὸν = to “keep” oneself (Ac. 15:29; Ja. 1:27)

ἀγαπητός = “beloved” (Ac. 15:25; Ja. 1:16, 19; 2:5)

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<sup>10</sup> R. Bauckham, *James* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 16; L. Johnson, *The Letter of James [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1995), p. 92; R. Martin, *New Testament Foundations*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 358; D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1970), p. 758; E. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 386-389. Even for those historical-critical scholars who suggest the letter may have been composed under a pseudonym, they generally argue that the pseudonym “James” refers to James the brother of the Lord, cf. W. Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. H. Kee (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), p. 412; R. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 741.

Theologically, there is much in the letter that seems to depend upon the teachings of Christ, and while some of these ideas may be found in other Jewish writers of the 1<sup>st</sup> century or earlier, the sheer number of them is remarkable. While they are not quotations, as allusions they suggest that James is drawing from the oral tradition of the church, which would naturally be the case, since James, the brother of the Lord, was not himself a disciple of Jesus during his earthly life. While the parallels can be found mostly in Matthew's Gospel, and most of them are from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the Letter of James does not seem dependent upon the written text of Matthew, which again suggests he is drawing from oral tradition.

The true disciple has joy in the midst of trials (Ja. 1:2; Mt. 5:10-12)  
 Maturity is the goal of discipleship (Ja. 1:4; Mt. 5:48)  
 God gives to those who ask (Ja. 1:5; Mt. 7:7)  
 One must have faith without doubting (Ja. 1:6; Mt. 21:21)  
 Anger must be put away (Ja. 1:20; Mt. 5:22)  
 It is important to "do" the word, not merely hear it (Ja. 1:22; Mt. 7:24-27)  
 The poor are heirs of God's kingdom (Ja. 2:5; Mt. 5:3)  
 The great commandment is to love one's neighbor (Ja. 2:8; Mt. 22:39)  
 The whole law is to be kept (Ja. 2:10; Mt. 5:19)  
 The merciful will receive mercy (Ja. 2:13; Mt. 5:7)  
 Doing God's will is what counts most (Ja. 2:14; Mt. 7:21)  
 There is danger in desiring to be a teacher (Ja. 3:1; Mt. 23:8-12)  
 Hasty speech is to be avoided (Ja. 3:2-10; Mt. 12:36-37)  
 Fruits show the character of the tree (Ja. 3:12; Mt. 7:16-18)  
 Peacemakers will be blessed (Ja. 3:18; Mt. 5:9)  
 One cannot be God's friend and the world's friend at the same time (Ja. 4:4; Mt. 6:24; Jn. 15:18-19)  
 The humble will be exalted by God (Ja. 4:10; Mt. 23:12; Lk. 14:11)  
 One must not judge his neighbor for fear of God's judgment (Ja. 4:11-12; Mt. 7:1)  
 Judgment is at the door (Ja. 5:9; Mt. 24:33)  
 Preserving earthly treasures must give way to justice (Ja. 5:2-3; Mt. 6:19-21)  
 The prophets are examples (Ja. 5:10; Mt. 5:12)  
 One must not swear by either heaven or earth (Ja. 5:12; Mt. 5:34-37)

Suffice it to say that the burden of proof for an alternative to James, the Lord's brother, rests upon those who would suggest it. They have objected on the grounds that the letter was numbered among those early disputed books in the canonical process, but this would not be unduly surprising if it was written primarily to Jewish Christians. The excellence of Greek diction in the letter is also suggested as less likely for a Palestinian Jew, but judging the language skills of someone two millennia ago who



lived in a bilingual region is risky at best. In any case, if an amanuensis was used as was the case for several other New Testament letters, the objection is moot. The fact that the book is largely a paraenesis, including diatribe, might more naturally be expected among Greeks than among Jews, but certainly St. Paul is a notable exception, so why not James? That the writer does not overtly claim a familial relationship with Christ can be set down to modesty. While certainty is impossible, likelihood still favors James the Lord's brother.

## The First Readers

James addresses his letter to “the twelve tribes in the *Diaspora*” (1:1) whose Christian meetings are still referred to as a “synagogue” (2:2). On the face of it, such an address presumes that the letter is intended for Jewish Christians, but might James have included others as well, such as, unconverted Jews, Hellenistic Jews or even both Jewish and Gentile Christians? Especially since other New Testament writers like Peter and Paul develop the theme of a new constitution of Israel, a remnant of faith that does not depend upon Jewish pedigree, the suggestion has been made that James may also be appealing to a wider audience. Indeed, Peter uses the very same term *Diaspora* in just this way (1 Pe. 1:1). Some have argued that after the Babylonian exile, the notion of the twelve tribes must be understood metaphorically (though one must use caution here, since obviously some remnants of the northern tribes fled as refugees to Jerusalem after the fall of Samaria and were traceable into the New Testament period, cf. 1 Chr. 9:3; Lk. 2:36; Ac. 26:7). Still, the use of the term synagogue to describe a Christian meeting place seems essentially Jewish and fits awkwardly with a non-Jewish constituency. At the same time, since James uses the term *Diaspora* he seems to intend Christians around the world, not merely in Palestine. His description of his readers as those whom the Father had given birth through the word of truth so that they might be a kind of firstfruits of his creation is especially appropriate to Christians, not Jews generally (1:18). The fact that given the paraenetic style of the letter he does not mention common pagan vices, such as, idolatry or sexual vices—those sins frequently mentioned in Paul's letters, for instance—suggests that his intended audience was Jewish Christians.

## Date

If James the brother of the Lord is accepted as the author, then the letter must date before his death in AD 62. While scholars who prefer him as the author have debated how early the letter may have been written, some suggesting a date as early as the late 40s,<sup>11</sup> the data is too minimal and the attempts too speculative to offer much substance.

## Style and Structure

Already, it has been mentioned that the letter is in the form of a paraenesis, that is, moral advice. The tone is imperative, and nearly half the verses contain imperative verbs. There is little in the way of formal doctrine, and there are no references to the death and resurrection of Christ, though such is probably assumed. Christ is directly mentioned only in 1:1 and 2:1. More directly, the letter is practical—how to live a moral life of faithfulness to God. Social injustice is a prominent theme. If the New Testament has a category for wisdom literature, then the Letter of James fits it perfectly. It frequently parallels the Hebrew wisdom tradition found in Proverbs and Sirach if not drawing from such works directly.<sup>12</sup>

God is not the source of temptation and sin (Ja. 1:13; Sirach 15:11-12).

An important virtue is to be quick to listen and slow to speak (Ja. 1:19a; Sirach 5:11).

Another virtue is being slow to anger (Ja. 1:19b; Pro. 14:29; 15:18; Eccl. 7:9; Sirach 28:8-9).

Care for the poor is incumbent on God's people (Ja. 2:6; Pro. 14:21).

Words are like fire (Ja. 3:6; Pro. 16:27; Sirach 28:11-12).

The mouth is the source of all sorts of problems (Ja. 3:9-12; Sirach 28:13-26).

God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble (Ja. 4:6; Pro. 3:34; Sirach 2:17-20).

Tomorrow is beyond human control (Ja. 4:13-14; Pro. 27:1).

Swearing oaths does not enhance the truth (Ja. 5:12; Sirach 23:9-11).

Offenses should be responded to with love and restoration (Ja. 5:20; Pro. 10:12).

The Letter of James is largely composed of groups of sayings or even individual sayings without obvious connectives, so much so, that some have

<sup>11</sup> D. Hiebert, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1977) 3.53.

<sup>12</sup> D. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), p. 821.

called it “an ethical scrapbook”.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, while the book is not structurally tight, it is not without strong themes, particularly the dangers of failing to control one’s speech and the essential difference between the wisdom from God as opposed to the wisdom of the prevailing culture. There are, in fact, some catchword associations that link some of the sayings early on. For instance, the word “steadfastness” (ὑπομονή) links 1:3 and 1:4, since it appears in both verses. The same is true for “lacking” (λείπω), which appears in 1:4 and 1:5, “asking” (αἰτέω), which appears in 1:5 and 1:6, and “doubting” (διακρίνω), which appears in 1:6a and 1:6b. This is hardly enough to constitute a formal structure, but it does indicate that the letter is not merely haphazard. Wisdom literature, especially in the Hebrew tradition, is not strictly linear, and its value is not so much in logic as in the observation of life. Luke Johnson points out that the sayings in chapter 1 function, more or less, like an index to topics treated more expansively in the short discourses that dominate the remainder of the book, topics such as: the endurance of trials (1:2-4, 12-15) as developed in 5:7-11; the contrast between rich and poor (1:9-11) as treated more fully in 4:13—5:6; the proper use of the tongue (1:19-22), which is expanded considerably in 3:1-12; the emphasis on doing the word (1:22-26), which is enlarged in 2:14-26; the nature of true wisdom (1:5-8, 16-18), which is developed in 3:13—4:10; and the prayer of faith (1:6-7) as amplified in 5:13-18.<sup>14</sup> These links give the overall work coherence.

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<sup>13</sup> A Hunter, *Introducing the New Testament*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), p. 169.

<sup>14</sup> L. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, rev ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), p. 510.

## COMMENTARY

### The Address (1:1)

Here, it will be assumed throughout that “James” is the younger half-brother of Jesus. He simply gives his name and calls himself “a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ”, a statement of clear modesty given his stature in the Jerusalem church over many years. Even though such an address clearly points toward classical Trinitarianism, the absence of a reference to the Spirit is not unusual. James’ readers are the twelve tribes of the *Diaspora*, presumably Christian Jews throughout the empire. Their dispersion began in the compulsory deportation of exiles to Assyria and Babylon several centuries earlier, and different centers of Jewish settlement continued throughout the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Periods. After the conquest of Palestine by Pompey in 63 BC, many more Jews were forced to leave Palestine. Some left voluntarily as well, with high concentrations in Egypt and Syria as well as Rome. Though they may not have known James personally, they certainly would have known of him. His affectionate address “brothers” and “dear brothers” throughout the letter testifies to his kindly regard (1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1; 4:11; 5:9, 12, 19).

### The Context of Suffering (1:2-18)

#### *The Goal of Suffering Successfully (1:2-8)*

While James will offer advice in a number of ways, and indeed will introduce his major subjects in the opening paragraphs to be addressed in more detail later, the context for his advice merits special attention. Clearly, he considers his readers to be undergoing “trials of many kinds” (1:2, 12). While the word *πειρασμός* can mean either “test” or “temptation”, James clearly has in mind the former, the idea of the test that is directed toward producing stronger and purer believers. Indeed, later he will bluntly refute

the notion that God tempts anyone toward evil (cf. 1:13). The current battery of trials his readers faced was a test of faith and faithfulness. This sort of test developed perseverance—the ability to stay the course in spite of extreme difficulties (1:3). The term ὑπομονή (= endurance, perseverance) is a combination of the preposition ὑπο (= under) and the intransitive verb μένω (= to stay, remain). “Staying under”—remaining faithful during the test—leads to Christian maturity (1:4). Barclay is quite correct in saying that such endurance is more than simply the ability to bear up under adversity; rather, it rises to turn such adversity into greatness and glory. Stephen, an early example of such perseverance in the midst of his trial before the Sanhedrin, “saw the glory of God” (Ac. 7:55). Likewise, many early Christian martyrs were remarkable in that they did not merely “die grimly, but they died singing”.<sup>15</sup> When a Christian allows endurance to have “perfect work”, the end result is a believer who becomes “perfect and complete, in nothing deficient” (1:4). The term τέλειος (= perfected, complete, mature, full-grown) is a key word for James, since he uses it several times (1:4, 17, 25; 3:2). It is not that Christians become morally impeccable through suffering, but rather, that their faith is now full-rounded, especially in an aspect of maturity that can come in no other way.

Since the date for the epistle is debated, it is unclear what type of adversity James especially may have had in mind. He offers no specific details. We know, of course, that the Jews were expelled from Rome under Claudius in AD 49, and Jewish Christians were not exempt from this eviction and its consequent economic distresses (cf. Ac. 18:2).<sup>16</sup> Grain shortages during the reigns of Claudius and Nero affected many cities in the empire so that there were serious food shortages (cf. Ac. 11:27-28).<sup>17</sup> The growing imperial cult created religious stresses for Christians of all types, Jewish or not, and while persecution accelerated and waned back and forth over the decades, certainly the trend was toward increased discomfort as the 1<sup>st</sup> century progressed. Too, the Jewish persecution of Christians that began under Saul of Tarsus, who initially regarded them as betrayers of Judaism prior to his own conversion, did not disappear. It is impossible to say if these were the sorts of things James may have had in mind, but they might well have been.

In the midst of such trials, every believer seeks wisdom from God in how to cope. Moreover, if trials are a necessary step in the path toward maturity, the believer needs understanding so that such trials may be

<sup>15</sup> W. Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, 25.4.

<sup>17</sup> B. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 220ff.

perceived and used in the right way. God gives such wisdom generously! He does not rebuke the seeker for asking, for God wants the believer to suffer successfully without failing the test (1:5). In asking God for wisdom, the sufferer must ask with the confidence that God will surely provide the needed wisdom to suffer successfully (1:6a). Otherwise, he will be vacillating, uncertain, and constantly seeking other alternatives—a double-minded man, like John Bunyan’s Mr. Facing-Both-Ways, no more stable than a wind-driven wave of the sea (1:6b-8).

### *Transitory Earthly Life (1:9-11)*

Earthly life is brief, and a realization of this truth brings with it a new and forceful perspective. While suffering may last for a time, the one who relies on God must always remember that the present life is short in comparison to the life to come. Those whose circumstances are humble or less affluent<sup>18</sup> should take pride in the larger truth that they have been greatly exalted in Christ (1:9). Those in more affluent circumstances must excel in self-abasement, where they realize that their material advantages are transitory and that they themselves will shrivel like dying flowers (1:10). The irony is that both may boast in the great Christian reversal—the humble will be raised up while the rich will be brought low (cf. Lk. 1:52-53). James here appeals to the common biblical metaphor of grass and flowers as analogous to temporal life (1:11; cf. Is. 40:6b-8; 1 Pe. 1:24-25).

### *The Role of God During Suffering (1:12-18)*

The most common questions of sufferers is, “Why?” or “Why me?” or “Where is God?” Perhaps a more appropriate question is, “Why not me?” While James does not offer a theoretical answer to the question of “why”, he certainly addresses the practical question of “how” and the role of God.

He begins with a beatitude: “Blessed is the man who endures a trial.”<sup>19</sup> James’ beatitude, of course, echoes the words of Jesus: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me” (cf. Mt. 5:11). A great reward awaits the sufferer in the afterlife! The one who perseveres under trial will be stamped “approved” by God. The term *δόκιμος* (= approved, certified) was used as a technical term in the ancient world to refer to such things as genuine coinage

<sup>18</sup> The term *ταπεινός* (= humble, undistinguished) is not so much speaking of mental attitudes as physical circumstances.

<sup>19</sup> The KJV and older versions have the word “temptation”, but modern versions are better in rendering the word as “trial”, which is the basic subject. To be sure, James addresses temptation in the succeeding verses, but his focus still is on “trials of many kinds” (cf. 1:2).

as opposed to counterfeit money as well as for pottery that was certified. It was stamped on ceramics that had passed through the firing process intact, and the term *adokimos* (= disapproved) was inscribed on pots that cracked in the firing.<sup>20</sup> Hence, it becomes a powerful metaphor for God's approval. God has promised a crown of life to those who endure the test (1:12)! The metaphor *στέφανος* (= wreath) alludes to the common symbol of victory in the Olympic games or the bestowal of public honor, a wreath of celery or leaves, and it was commonly used by New Testament writers, especially Paul, to refer to the rewards of the afterlife (cf. 1 Co. 9:25; Phil. 4:1; 1 Th. 2:19; 2 Ti. 4:8; 1 Pe. 5:4; Rv. 2:10; 3:11).

As to the role of God during suffering, James quickly rebuts the common response of blaming God. God may test his people so that they may be approved, but he never tempts them to do wrong. The fact that the homonym James uses, *πειρασμός*, can mean either a trial or a temptation, depending on context, gives James a perfect opportunity to distinguish between the two. The irony is that any given circumstance can become either—it can be a test by which God builds maturity into one's life or it can be a temptation by which a sufferer may accuse God unjustly—all depending upon one's response. James does not deny that God tests his people, but he emphatically denies that God tests them with evil intent and so tempts them to sin.<sup>21</sup> In God's tests he desires his children to succeed, which are very unlike the temptations of Satan, who desires God's children to fail. Unlike the deities of eastern pantheism, God is wholly above evil. He never tempts people to do evil, and he himself is not tempted to do evil (1:13). Temptation arises from fallen human nature, and it follows a clear progression beginning with wrong desires leading to enticement<sup>22</sup> to sin which in turn ends in death (1:14-15). The metaphor of conception, birth and death suggests that sin, which seemingly begins very small, continues to grow until it is a giant that at last overpowers its victims.

God's role in suffering, then, is not in tempting the sufferer to sin but in offering good gifts in the midst of suffering, especially the gift of wisdom (1:16-17; cf. 1:5). God is good all the time, even in the midst of human suffering, and those who suffer must not be tricked into thinking otherwise. The reason all gifts from above are good is because the essence of God is goodness. He is the origin of all light, both physical and moral, and his

<sup>20</sup> H. Haarbeck, *NIDNTT* (1978) 3.808; D. Roper, *The Law That Sets You Free* (Waco, TX: Word, 1977), p. 32.

<sup>21</sup> R. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James [TNTC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> The verb *δελιάζω* (= enticed, lured) is a fishing metaphor for baiting a hook, R. Martin, *James [WBC]* (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), p. 36.

essential nature is unchangeable. Unlike shadows, shapes that are dependent upon a light source beyond themselves, God, the Father, is himself Light and the origin of light! His very best gift is new birth, which he determined in advance<sup>23</sup> to give to humans so that they would be the first-fruits of the whole created order (1:18). That James is speaking of new birth through the Spirit and not merely natural birth (or even the creation of Adam) seems clearly indicated by the added expression “word of truth”, which is a synonym for the gospel (cf. 2 Co. 6:7; Ep. 1:13; Col. 1:5; 2 Ti. 2:15). The metaphor of first-fruits depicts new-birth humans as the highest of God’s creatures. The first-fruits metaphor was used both in Hebrew culture, deriving from the first-fruits festival of the harvest, as well as in Greek culture, where it signified first things or honored things.<sup>24</sup> God’s sovereign will was for humans to experience this new birth so that they might be presented at the end of the age as trophies of his divine purpose. Hence, any suffering in the present was minimal compared with this greater reward that God would give to those who persevered (cf. 2 Co. 4:17-18).

## God’s Word and Human Words (1:19-27)

Alluding to ancient Hebrew wisdom,<sup>25</sup> James begins drawing a comparison between the words of humans, which often are fraught with danger and injury, and the Word of God, which is perfect. He urges his listeners to restrain their propensity to speak quickly and to cultivate the art of listening (1:19a). Especially, they must be slow to become angry, since anger usually is expressed in biting speech (1:19b), and in all cases, human anger works<sup>26</sup> against the righteousness of God (1:20).

There is considerable discussion as to how to take the genitive phrase “righteousness of God”. Is this God’s own righteous intent in allowing suffering as a test (subjective genitive)? Is it the righteousness that God intends to reproduce in his people (objective genitive)? Both are grammatically possible. English versions vary, some favoring the first option or leaving the issue undefined (so RSV, NRSV, NASB, NEB, NKJB, ASV, NAB, JB, TEV) and others settling for the second option, usually by a

<sup>23</sup> The Greek participle βουληθεῖς (= having purposed) suggests that this new birth was according to God’s sovereign will.

<sup>24</sup> G. Delling, *TDNT* (1964) 1.484-485.

<sup>25</sup> Though James does not offer a direct quotation, his words are very similar to Sirach 5:11: “Be quick to hear, and be deliberate in answering.”

<sup>26</sup> The verb James uses is ἐργάζομαι (= to accomplish, to work), and its nuance here depends on how translators understand the associated phrase, the “righteousness of God”.



dynamic equivalency (so NIV, ESV, CEV, Weymouth, Phillips). If what James says about human anger and speech is to be linked to his foregoing discussion of perseverance under trial, then it is easier to understand his meaning to be the first option, that is, that God's justice in allowing suffering must not be impugned. Human anger does not reflect God's righteousness, and becoming angry during suffering implies accusation against God. On the other hand, if James' comments about anger and speech are disconnected from the previous context of suffering and are allowed to stand more or less independently, then it is easier to follow the second option that human anger does not produce the righteous life God intends his people to live. Here, the address "dear brothers" in 1:19 (which parallels 1:2) is taken as the beginning of a new and independent subject. Both options seem equally feasible, but in the interests of the larger context of suffering, the first option is perhaps the best.

Assuming, then, that the context of suffering is still in focus, James urges moral purity during suffering (1:21a). It is not, of course, that moral purity is less important at other times, but rather, that during times of adversity the temptation to neglect moral integrity may become more acute. Therefore, the sufferer must "strip off" anything that would soil him<sup>27</sup> and receive the implanted Word of God that brings salvation (1:21b). The idea of the implanted word may well go back to Jesus' parable of the sower (Mt. 13:3-9), where the seed represented the gospel of the kingdom (Mt. 13:18-23).<sup>28</sup> The expression that this word "saves your soul" employs the term "soul" in its Hebraic sense of the whole person, not the in the restricted sense of Hellenistic dualism.<sup>29</sup>

Hearing God's Word during suffering must lead to acting out his Word. To hear only without implementation is self-deception (1:22). It is listening to the lecture but never putting it to practical use.<sup>30</sup> The who listens only is like someone glancing in a mirror,<sup>31</sup> which reveals his natural disposition and the lines of experience, but he immediately ignores this evidence and refuses to allow it to inform his lifestyle (1:23-24). James'

<sup>27</sup> The verb ἀποτίθημι (= take off) is often used for stripping off clothing. The term ῥυπαρία (= dirt) becomes a metaphor for sordidness, while περισείαν κακίας (= surplus of depravity) points to the abundance of wickedness in the world, and indeed, the abundance of evil in the human heart.

<sup>28</sup> While the word ἔμφυτος can also mean innate on rare occasions, it is unlikely that this is what James has in mind. The more usual farming orientation of the term seems to fit best, if for no other reason, than the presence of the verb "receive". To "receive" what is already innate seems a contradiction in terms.

<sup>29</sup> H. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. M. Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), pp. 10-25; G. Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), pp. 97-101.

<sup>30</sup> The verb ἀκροατής (= a listener) is linked to the word ἀκροατήριον (= auditorium, lecture room).

<sup>31</sup> The KJV has "glass", but of course, mirrors in the 1<sup>st</sup> century were usually circular disks of burnished copper or the like. In any case, the word ἔσποτρον does not mean "glass".

expression here is unusual in that he speaks of “the face of his birth”, that is, the face nature gave him. James seems to extend the meaning to refer to the whole of life (cf. 3:6).<sup>32</sup> By contrast, the one who looks closely into the perfect law of freedom, who accepts its message and allows it to transform him, will be blessed (1:25).

This reference to “law” has become an interpretive crux. Does James refer to the law of Moses? In Acts, he seems to have been pleased that Christian Jews in Jerusalem were “zealous for the law” (Ac. 21:20), and he was anxious that Paul not be perceived by these Christian Jews as urging other Jews to abandon Moses (Ac. 21:24). On the other hand, James already has spoken about the “implanted Word” while later he will speak of the “royal law” (cf. 2:8), expressions that are more easily associated with the teachings of Jesus (Mt. 13:18-23; 22:34-40). Perhaps these two ideas are not mutually exclusive. If Christ came, not to destroy Moses’ law but to fulfill it (Mt. 5:17-20), then the law of Christ is a perfect fulfillment of what the law of Moses was intended to be, which is exactly what St. Paul also says (Ro. 13:8-10). As the law of love, it offers true freedom, not imposed legalism (cf. Ga. 5:13-14).

Finally, true religion does not use suffering as an excuse for loose speech (1:26-27). Here, James uses two related words, *θησκευός* (= religious) and *θησκευεία* (= religion, worship), and both are relatively rare. They refer primarily to the outward form of worship in its liturgies and ceremonies. If anyone thinks of himself as especially religious but does not curb his tongue, his religion is useless, no matter what he does in the worship service. Kierkegaard’s scathing commentary on such religion was that it was “just as genuine as tea made with a bit of paper which once had been used to wrap a few tea-leaves from which tea had already been made three times.”<sup>33</sup> Suffering is not an excuse to become verbally abusive, especially in accusations against God, and perhaps James has in mind the ancient commendation of Job, who in spite of his suffering did not “sin with his lips” (Job 1:22; 2:10). Genuine religion—religion that is untainted and pure—must be expressed in practical acts of charity to those who are at a disadvantage. Orphans and widows are two conspicuous examples, but other examples could be multiplied. What James says here is no more than what the prophets had preached to Israel. Yahweh’s word through Isaiah about religion was blunt: *When you come to meet with me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your*

<sup>32</sup> R. Williams, *The Letters of John and James [CBC]* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1965), pp. 106-107.

<sup>33</sup> As cited by J. Adamson, *The Epistle of James [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 86.

*incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your assemblies. ...stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow* (Is. 1:10-17; cf. Am. 4:4-5; Je. 7:1-11). Genuine religion is the sort that does not capitulate to worldly values. Instead, it preserves its integrity by remaining unblemished by the world.

## **The Sin of Favoritism (2:1-13)**

Building upon his advice concerning genuine religion, James expands and applies his advice specifically to the community made up of various social strata. A rather rigid social hierarchy existed in the ancient world of both Jews and Gentiles. Jews held ancestry in highest regard. Together with priests and Levites, Israelites of pure birth made up the pure Israel, and pure ancestry had to be proved. Pure ancestry, in turn, assured certain rights, such as, marriage to a priest, membership in the Sanhedrin, and the possibility of holding positions of honor and trust in the community. Blemishes in the genealogical record disqualified one from seats on certain courts, tribunals and positions of public honor. Those outside Israel, such as Samaritans and Gentiles, were regularly despised. Similarly, occupations were graded, even for Jews, and some trades were dishonorable and even despised, especially those that might cause ritual uncleanness.<sup>34</sup> In the Gentile world, a social hierarchy was reinforced from the time of Augustus as part of his reconstruction policy, and the basis of the policy was birth and legal status. The empire was composed of citizens, slaves, business owners, patrons, clients, and the like. Social structures regulated social powers in the communities.<sup>35</sup> Hence, when James urged that Christian believers should not show favoritism (2:1), he definitely was swimming against a cultural tide! The expression *προσωποληψία* (= to receive by face)—to receive on the basis of appearance or other external qualities—is precisely what the law of Moses forbade (cf. Lv. 19:15). God does not “receive by face” (cf. Ro. 2:11; Ep. 6:9; Col. 3:25)!

One ancient benchmark for favoritism was wealth, and James singles out those attending the “synagogue” as both affluent and poor (2:2).<sup>36</sup> Some

<sup>34</sup> J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, trans. F. H. and C. H. Cave (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), pp. 271-358.

<sup>35</sup> D. Tidball, *The Social Context of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), pp. 76-103.

<sup>36</sup> The use of the term *συναγωγή* (= synagogue) here has been much discussed, since it is the usual term for a Jewish synagogue. The context clearly refers to a Christian meeting, however, and later James will

seats apparently were better than others, and if by the term “synagogue” James means a meeting place designed after the fashion of some Jewish synagogues, where the seats were arranged in tiers around the interior walls, the best seats were higher up with the worst being literally on the floor. In Roman society, a gold ring and fine clothes probably indicated that the person wearing them was a member of the aristocracy, perhaps even of senatorial rank or a candidate for an elective political office.<sup>37</sup> Showing favor to such people by offering them the best seats, while relegating the lesser seats to the poor, was a capitulation to discrimination and worldly values (2:3-4).

James reminds his readers that God has a special interest in the poor precisely because they are deprived of other worldly advantages. Low social standing does not prohibit the poor from being wealthy in faith, and as Jesus taught, the poor are blessed because the kingdom is theirs (2:5; cf. Mt. 5:3//Lk. 6:20). To dishonor the poor, then, is to dishonor those whom God has chosen for himself. God did not merely settle for the poor, he chose them as an act of his grace! They are the special objects of his love. How, then, could Christians demean them in their assemblies, especially since it was usually the wealthy who took advantage of others in society and even in the courts (2:6). While there was much to admire in Roman law, it must be frankly conceded that it was consciously framed and administered to provide legal advantages to those with higher social status.<sup>38</sup> Similar advantages were accorded members of Jewish “fraternities”, such as, the Pharisees.<sup>39</sup> All too often it was precisely such people who “blaspheme the good name called upon you” (2:7), by which James almost certainly means the name “Christian” (Ac. 11:26).<sup>40</sup>

Jesus taught that the greatest commandment in the Torah was to love God fully (Dt. 6:5)—and close to it was the second greatest commandment, to love one’s neighbor as oneself (Lv. 19:18; Mk. 12:29-31//Mt. 22:37-

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use the more customary term ἐκκλησία (= church). Hence, usually this reference is understood to be a Christian meeting, though James, because he is addressing the Jewish-Christian Diaspora (cf. 1:1), uses the familiar Jewish term.

<sup>37</sup> In the earlier days of the empire, only those of senatorial rank were allowed to wear a gold finger ring, cf. B. Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter and Jude [AB]*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), p. 27.

<sup>38</sup> P. Garnsey, *Social Status and Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), as cited by Winter, p. 44.

<sup>39</sup> A. Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 236ff.

<sup>40</sup> The expression “the good name called upon you” is Hebraic syntax, not Greek. Theoretically, James could refer to the occasion of Christian baptism, where the shorter formula was used for Jewish converts (Ac. 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5). However, in light of the fact that he is speaking in a social context rather than the private context of a Christian ceremony, it seems more likely that he has in mind the name “Christian”.

39//Lk. 10:27-28). James calls this the “royal law”,<sup>41</sup> the law that came from Israel’s true King, the Lord Jesus Christ (2:8). It is to the point that such love is active, not merely emotive or passive.<sup>42</sup> Showing favoritism militates directly against this royal law, resulting in “working sin”. The unusual expression “you work sin” (ἄμαρτίαν ἐργάζεσθε) underscores the seriousness of the offense (2:9a).<sup>43</sup> Assuming the unity of the Torah, it is clear that to break one commandment is to break the whole (2:9b-11). One need not break all the commandments or even many to be classified as a law-breaker. A single transgression will suffice. Hence, to keep all the law except the commandment against favoritism still results in transgression. James here intends his readers not to trivialize the issue of social bias. He is not negating forgiveness or grace (cf. 5:15b-16). He simply is forcefully pointing out that partiality is as much a sin as any other sin and must not be passed over as innocuous.

Finally, James says that believers should behave like those who realize they will be held accountable (2:12a; cf. Ro. 14:10; 2 Co. 5:10). He is quick to qualify this judgment as operating under a law that gives freedom (2:12b). By this expression, James clearly intends the Christian view of law, the royal law of love that fulfills the whole (cf. Ro. 13:10). A life of love is the highest form of freedom, because it exempts one from legalism. At the same time, it raises the bar, for while it sets free those who live by it, it also condemns those who transgress it! No mercy can be expected for those who refuse mercy to others, as Jesus also taught (2:13a; Mt. 5:7; 6:12-15; 18:21-35). The final phrase, “Mercy triumphs over judgment,” is a pointed affirmation that the mercy one extends to others demonstrates a deep recognition of God’s mercy to oneself (2:13b). The royal law links justice with forgiveness so that justice and mercy work together rather than against each other. Legalism separates justice from mercy. By contrast, the royal law combines them. Judgment without mercy will be the lot of those who are not merciful, since they themselves sever the link between the two. On the other hand, true mercy rejoices over judgment.

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<sup>41</sup> Βασιλικὸν νόμον (= kingly law, sovereign law, royal law)

<sup>42</sup> While the Hebrew verb אָהַב (= to love) usually is transitive and takes an object, the command to love one’s neighbor is intransitive and is followed by an indirect object introduced by the preposition “to” (i.e., you shall do love to your neighbor), a relatively rare construction. What is intended is not merely emotional concern but beneficial action, assistance or concrete help, cf. A. Malamat, “Love Your Neighbor as Yourself: What It Really Means,” *BAR* (Jul/Aug 1990), pp. 50-51.

<sup>43</sup> More usual is the verbal expression merely “to sin”, but to “work sin” is emphatic.

## Faith and Works (2:14-26)

James' comments about keeping the royal law lead naturally into his discussion of faith and works. If as St. Paul says believers were "created in Christ Jesus to do good works" (Ep. 2:10), then a claim of faith without good works undermines the claim. The mere claim cannot save such a person (2:14). It is important at the outset to observe James' language: *ἐάν τις λέγει τις ἔχειν ἔργα δὲ μὴ ἔχει* (= "...if anyone says he has faith but he has not works..."). Essentially, James argues that the claim of faith without Christian works is an empty claim—it is not real faith, but pseudo-faith. The question, "Can faith save him?" is tantamount to "Can [such] faith save him?" No, it cannot, because it is not real faith! Using an example of poverty in the Christian community, which others in the community ignore at least in any practical way, James pronounces such "faith" as dead, which is another way of saying it is not real Christian faith (2:15-17). One cannot divorce faith from love. Faith is not merely a cerebral construct but a living reality, and where genuine faith is present there are practical outcomes in good works.

If someone should argue that faith and good works can be severed, as though the one could exist without the other, James responds that genuine Christian faith is a living faith validated by loving action (2:18).<sup>44</sup> Apart from such validation, the claim of faith is immediately suspect. To anyone claiming that some Christians can have faith while others have works, but they do not necessarily need to be linked, James gives the stinging rebuttal that such a cleavage between faith and good works parallels the faith of demons. Demons, also, believe in God, but they certainly are not creatures of good works! This separation of faith and works is not much different than the claim of some modern branches of liberal Protestantism that champion social justice but have given up on the gospel or conservative Protestants

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<sup>44</sup> James hypothetical language in 2:18, "If someone will say...", is somewhat ambiguous. James is obviously quoting either a real person or a hypothetical person, but it is unclear how far the quotation should extend. Some translations include in the quotation everything to the end of 2:18 (so NASB, Phillips, Williams), and others extend it even farther, with one translation including 2:19 (Weymouth) and another extending the quotation all the way to 2:23 (JB). Most translations, however, stop the quotation after the first sentence in 2:18 (so RSV, NRSV, ESV, NKJV, NAB, NEB, TEV, NIV). Older English Versions do not include quotation marks at all, KJV, ASV, etc.). How one renders the quotation in turn affects how one understands what James intends. Does he refer to an objector whose claim of faith is invalid (the shorter quotation) or to someone whom he considers to have true faith but needs to add good works to validate it (the longer quotations). Commentators go both ways, with some taking it in the latter sense (e.g., J. Adamson, p.p. 124-125, 135-137). On the whole, however, the former sense seems best, cf. R. Tasker, pp.65-66, which is what I have followed here.

who argue for salvation by faith alone but offer no real effort toward those in need.

Addressing this hypothetical person directly, James calls him a dunderhead (κενός = empty-head, fool) for demanding evidence that faith separated from good works is barren (2:20). As an example, James links Abraham's confession of faith (he believed God, cf. Ge. 15:6) with his active obedience in offering his son Isaac (he acted on his faith, cf. Ge. 22). Abraham's claim of faith was validated by his obedient action (2:21-23). Initially, his faith was credited to him as righteousness (Ge. 15:6), but by his obedient action Yahweh also said, "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son" (Ge. 22:12). This deep relationship, which inextricably linked Abraham's faith with his obedient action, was the basis for God calling Abraham his friend (cf. 2 Chr. 20:7; Is. 41:8). Hence, the claim of faith is validated by what one does, not by words alone (2:24).

Since the Reformation, voluminous discussions have occurred over the seeming contradiction between the words of James and the words of Paul.

*You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.*  
James 2:24

*We...know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.*

*Galatians 2:15-16*

That the wording is quite close and the example of Abraham is used by both writers sharpens the debate. James underscores the fact that Abraham not only believed God but also offered up his son Isaac. Paul, on the other hand, appeals to Abraham, but strictly in terms of his faith alone (Ga. 3:6ff.).

This is one place where defining the terms used in the context of the respective writers is critical. What might seem to be mutually exclusive, in fact, is not so at all. One must take into account the purpose of each writer. James is writing to those who claim salvation, but he means to say that their claim is undermined if they do not follow through with a life of discipleship. This is no more than what Jesus himself taught (Mt. 7:21-23). Hence, the word justify (δικαίω) carries for James the connotation of vindication. It parallels his earlier metaphor of δόκιμος (= approved) in 1:12. A person's claim to faith is vindicated by a life of discipleship, especially a life of good works. Paul, on the other hand, addresses the means by which one is saved

in the first place—and that means is through faith alone. For Paul, the verb justify has the more forensic nuance of acquittal, and one is acquitted by faith, not by works of the law. Paul and James were hardly addressing the same topic, similarity of vocabulary notwithstanding. Hence, there is no final conflict between them. James was combating a pseudo-faith that resulted in no real discipleship. Paul was combating the legalism that good works in themselves merited saving favor.

As a final example of the union of true faith and a life of good works, James cites the story of Rahab from the Book of Joshua (cf. Jos. 2; 6:22-25). Rahab believed the promise of the spies that she would be spared, but she also was clearly warned that their oath to spare her would not be binding if she failed to hang the scarlet cord from her window (2:25; Jos. 2:17-21). Her action in hiding the spies worked together with her frank acknowledgement that Yahweh had given the Israelites the land (Jos. 2:8-13). Her “faith” was not severed from her “deeds”! Faith cannot be severed from good works any more than the body can be separated from the spirit without a resulting death (2:26)!

## **Why Teachers Take on Significant Risk (3:1-12)**

Clearly, positions of responsibility require more diligence. In the writing prophets, while the entire nation of Israel was chastised for its waywardness, the leaders were chastised most severely, because their delinquent leadership charted the pathway toward unfaithfulness (cf. Am. 6:1-7; Ho. 7:1-7; Isa. 10:1-4; 28:7-22; Mic. 2:6-11; Je. 23; Eze. 34; Zec. 11:4-17). Jesus counseled that his followers should avoid the term rabbi or teacher, for in the end only Christ is the true teacher (Mt. 23:10). Obviously, this restriction was taken as a warning, not an absolute prohibition. In the early church, Paul actually ranks three ministries as first, second and third—apostles, prophets and teachers—and in that order (1 Co. 12:28). All other gifts and ministries are after those three. He links the role of pastors with teachers so that the two function together.<sup>45</sup> Those who are given such a trust must prove faithful (1 Co. 4:1-2). In their teaching ministry, they must take care “not to go beyond what is written” (1 Co. 4:6). While such leaders are to be obeyed, such leaders also are accountable directly to God (He. 13:17). Hence, it comes as no surprise to hear James say that not many should aspire

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<sup>45</sup> In his listing in Ephesians 4:11 Paul allows a single definite article to govern “pastors and teachers”, which links them as belonging to a single category. The Anchor Bible’s translation of “teaching shepherds” is therefore appropriate.



to the ministry of teaching in the church (3:1a). Teachers will be held to a higher standard (3:1b). Teaching is a dangerous occupation, because it involves the one human expression, human speech, which is the most difficult to discipline. Earlier, James said that any religious person must keep a tight rein on his speech (cf. 1:26), but if that observation is true generally, then it is especially the case for teachers. “We all” (i.e., all of us who are teachers) “stumble in many ways” (3:2a).<sup>46</sup> A teacher who never stumbles in speech must surely be perfection itself (3:2b)!

What is true for horses and ships is also true for the tongue. Horses and ships are guided by bridles and rudders; similarly, the character of the whole person turns on his speech (3:3-5).<sup>47</sup> Small as the tongue may be, its potential for damage is great. Like a small flame, it is capable of burning an entire forest. Human speech is itself a kind of fire and the part of human expression capable of the most evil, staining one’s whole character and scorching the entire human existence (3:6a).<sup>48</sup> Human speech is enflamed by *gehenna*, the place of cosmic evil (3:6b).<sup>49</sup> Jesus used the imagery of *gehenna* to describe final punishment (Mt. 5:22, 29-30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mk. 9:43-49; Lk. 12:5), and it may well be that James alludes to it precisely because Jesus did.

The taming of animals was well-known in the ancient world (3:7), but human ingenuity in controlling animals had never been successful in taming human speech (3:8a). The tongue continued to be an undisciplined evil and as deadly as a viper’s poison. James does not mention vipers, but the link between a viper’s mouth and its death-dealing poison was probably intended as an implied parallel to the deadliness of human speech. Human speech is often unstable and double-dealing. At the same time it praises God and

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<sup>46</sup> The first person plural verb of 3:1 (“we shall receive judgment”) matches the first person plural in 3:2 (“we all stumble”).

<sup>47</sup> Throughout, James uses the “tongue” as a metonymy for speech.

<sup>48</sup> James’ expression *φλογίζουσα τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως* (= setting on fire the wheel of origin) has received considerable attention by scholars, since the notion of the wheel of nature or cycle of existence had a long history in notions of reincarnation by the mystery religions. Ralph Martin is probably correct in concluding that James uses this expression in a non-technical way, simply meaning that the tongue sets on fire everything it addresses, cf. Martin, pp. 115-116.

<sup>49</sup> The origin of the metaphor *γέεννα* (= hell), the Grecianized word for the Valley of Hinnom southwest of Jerusalem used as the general garbage dump for the city, is in intertestamental Jewish apocalyptic literature. As a dump, it continually smoldered and decayed. Once used for idolatrous worship and child sacrifice (2 Chr. 28:3; Je. 7:31), *gehenna* came to symbolize the place of final punishment (1 Enoch 54:1-6), an abyss full of fire (1 Enoch 90:26-27) where the wicked go “to the fire and the path that leads to burning coals” (2 Baruch 85:13). *Gehenna*, therefore, is described as the “furnace of the earth” (Apocalypse of Abraham 14:5) and “the dead house of Tartarus...Gehenna of terrible, raging, undying fire” (Sibylline Oracles 1:100-103). This metaphorical usage tended to separate *gehenna* from its geographical location but retain its fiery nature.

curses others who are made in God's image, thus compromising any glorification of God by defaming those who were made to reflect his character (3:9; cf. Ge. 1:26-27; 5:1). The very same mouth offers a mixture of expressions, and it is to the point that James directs his comments toward Christians by using the inclusive "we" and "my brothers" (3:10). If both fresh water and salt water does not emerge from the same spring, and if fig trees do not produce olives nor grapevines produce figs, then neither should Christians be exhibiting such conflicting speech patterns (3:11-12). Speaking both ways harks back to James' earlier description of the unstable and double-minded man (cf. 1:8b).

### **Wisdom from Above Versus Wisdom from Below (3:13-18)**

As with human speech, James now expounds in more detail on the subject of wisdom that he introduced at the beginning (cf. 1:5), and its connection with the control of one's tongue is obvious. There are two kinds of wisdom, conventional, earthly wisdom and wisdom from God. They are fundamentally incompatible! Those who make any claim to wisdom should seriously examine their claim in order to discern its true origin (3:13a). That James frames his introduction as a question suggests that there were among his readers self-styled and self-acclaimed wise people, possibly teachers (though probably not limited to them), who wished others to think that they were especially learned. Anyone who claimed to be truly wise should demonstrate wisdom by humble acts of goodness (3:13b), for good works derive from true wisdom. Conventional, earthly wisdom springs from impure motives, like harsh jealousy and rivalry (3:14a). The terms suggest that there were factions among the believers. Each side or perhaps different leaders from each side were attempting to advance themselves under the boastful claim of wisdom, while in reality each was seeking selfish advantage while undermining their own truth claims (3:14b). This sort of wisdom (and the NIV properly puts "wisdom" in quotation marks to denote James' sarcasm) is not true wisdom at all. Its source is not in heaven but on earth! It is sensual and demonic (3:15)!<sup>50</sup> Any time there is jealousy and rivalry in the community of Christians, especially among leaders, there is resulting upheaval and all sorts of worthless practices (3:16).

<sup>50</sup> The three adverbs James uses, ἐπιγῆιος (= earthly), ψυχικὴ (= pertaining to natural life) and δαιμονιώδης (= demon-like), give rise to the English expression "the world, the flesh and the devil" and roughly parallels the ideas in 1 John 2:16.

All this is poles apart from the wisdom that comes from above.<sup>51</sup> Godly wisdom is pure, that is, it is unadulterated by lower human motives. Godly wisdom makes for peace. It's character is forbearance and consideration of others, not the bull-dog tenacity to win at any cost. It yields to persuasion without the stubborn attempt to maintain a position when there are no serious moral or theological issues at stake. People with such wisdom exhibit mercy and good fruit. They are impartial and sincere—not given to a party-spirit, but working toward harmony (3:17). As Jesus said, peacemakers are rightly perceived to be godly persons (cf. Mt. 5:9). They sow in peace, and their harvest is righteousness (3:18)!

## Infighting Among Christians (4:1-12)

If there were disputes between church leaders all claiming superior wisdom, which the foregoing section seems to suggest, then it comes as no surprise that the congregations themselves were divided by factions.<sup>52</sup> Hence, James addresses the origin of church factions directly. They derive from conflicting human desires between Christians—mixed motives of envy and selfish ambition alongside their professed desire to serve God (4:1; cf. 3:16).<sup>53</sup> Deprived of their desires, even Christians can resort to murdering and coveting, flagrantly breaking two of the ten commandments (4:2) and implicitly violating the royal law (cf. 2:8). It is likely that in referring to murder James is assuming the definition given by Jesus, a definition with which his readers would have been familiar (cf. Mt. 5:21-24). Christians not only fight to get what they want, they even pray to get what they want, but their prayers are corrupted (κακῶς = corruptly, wickedly)! God does not answer them, because he knows only too well that their motives are compromised (4:3a). If what James says here seems to be in tension with what he says earlier in 1:5 and later in 5:16-18, where praying believers get what they ask for, it must be conceded that there are no “every time” rules about answered prayer. Prayer is never *carte blanche*, and praying in the

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<sup>51</sup> The phrase “wisdom from above” and the earlier phrase “wisdom from heaven” are common Jewish circumlocutions for God, similar to the phrase “kingdom of heaven” in Matthew’s Gospel for “kingdom of God”.

<sup>52</sup> Commentators are not all agreed on whether this section is linked with what precedes it, but the conceptual themes of envy, ambition, and disorder in the preceding advice and the “fights and quarrels among you” in this section seem substantial enough that the two should be connected, not treated as disparate subjects.

<sup>53</sup> Quite literally, the verb James uses is “soldiering” (στρατεύομαι = to do military service, to serve in the army).

wrong spirit from wrong motives will not result in a favorable answer from God! If one has no intention of helping others or serving God with his gifts, but merely consuming them for selfish reasons,<sup>54</sup> God certainly will not respond favorably! C. S. Lewis puts it aptly, “There are two kinds of people: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, 'All right then, have it your way' (*The Great Divorce*). It is the ungrateful that God “gives over” to the consequences of their own narcissistic desires (cf. Ro. 1:24, 26, 28).

James chastises these double-minded people by saying that such factionalism in reality is a kind of spiritual adultery. It is akin to unfaithfulness in a marriage. Here, of course, it is not a woman pursuing two men,<sup>55</sup> but a Christian pursuing both the world and the Lord. In using the polarized terms of “friendship” and “hatred”, James underscores the truth that a Christian with worldly ambitions, worldly values and worldly techniques implicitly sets himself up as God’s enemy (4:4). No matter what else he claims—whether he claims to have faith (cf. 2:14) or claims to have superior wisdom (cf. 3:13)—his claims are negated by his compatibility with worldly systems. Again, he poses a rhetorical question: “Or do you really imagine that the Scripture says without ground...”

There are two problems with the citation that follows, one its translation and the other its source. With respect to translation, there are two alternatives, each in turn yielding two potential meanings:

*He [God] jealously yearns for the [human] spirit [or, the Holy Spirit] which he has made to dwell within us.* (so NASB, ESV, RSV, NRSV, CEV, Moffat, Goodspeed)

- If translated in this way, then either God yearns for some reciprocal devotion from the human spirit that he gave to humans at the creation (RSV, NRSV, ESV, Moffat) or else he yearns for (or truly cares for) the Holy Spirit he has given to believers in their regeneration (NASB, CEV, Goodspeed)

*The Spirit [or, spirit] which God has made to dwell within us yearns jealously.* (so ASV, KJV, NKJV, NAB, NEB, TEV, JB, Weymouth, Alford)

- If translated in this way, then either the Holy Spirit yearns for some reciprocal devotion from humans (NKJV, JB, Weymouth, Alford) or else the human spirit inherently is characterized by jealousy (ASV, KJV, NAB, NEB, TEV).

<sup>54</sup> The verb *δαπανάω* means to spend without restraint, hence, wastefully.

<sup>55</sup> James uses the feminine form *μοιχαλίδες* (= adulteresses), but it would be equally true the other way around.

J. B. Phillips takes his own course and offers the more conflated rendering, *Or do you imagine that...this spirit of passionate jealousy is the Spirit he has caused to live in us?*

- Phillips translation, of course, has the distinct problem of taking the single word “spirit” in the Greek text and making it into two words, both “Spirit” and “spirit”. This can hardly be the case!

There are several grammatical ambiguities in the Greek text. First, the form of the verb “to dwell” has manuscript variations, some reading the causative form *κατώκισεν* (= caused to dwell) and some reading the intransitive form *κατώκησεν* (= which dwells).<sup>56</sup> Then, the verbal expression *πρὸς φθόνον ἐπιποθεῖ* (= desires to jealousy, yearns to envy) can be taken either positively or negatively. When used of humans, jealousy is a negative quality that springs from impure motives. When used of God, jealousy is the rightful demand for exclusive allegiance. To complicate things more, the KJV translators, following William Tyndale, rendered the verb as “lusteth”, which carries decidedly negative overtones. Finally, it is unclear who is the subject of the verb. Three options are all grammatically possible—that it is “he [God] yearns” or the “[human] spirit yearns” or the “[Holy] Spirit yearns”.<sup>57</sup> Whatever meaning one adopts among the translational and hermeneutical options (and none of them can be held with anything more than a tentative grasp), James clearly wants to say that the position of those who adopt worldly values is in conflict with Scripture.

James says the source of this citation is “the writing” or “the Scripture” (*ἡ γραφή*). He uses the typical term that is widely used in the New Testament to quote passages from the Old Testament. The problem is that there is no passage in the Old Testament quite like this citation. Some have suggested that perhaps James is aware of some other writing he considered to be Scripture which has been lost to us, but this seems unlikely. While there may have been some lingering ambiguity about the limits of the *Kethubim* (the third section of the Hebrew canon), there is no evidence that New Testament writers knew of some other writings outside this collection that they would have considered to be Scripture. Alternatively, perhaps James is using the term “the writing”, not as a reference to inspired

<sup>56</sup> B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (London/New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), p. 683. The form *κατώκησεν* has the best attestation (*ϣ*<sup>74</sup>, *Ⲛ*, A, B, etc.), but the conclusion is far from clear.

<sup>57</sup> The third person, singular present indicative form *ἐπιποθεῖ* can be taken as already having the implied subject “he” (i.e., God), or it may refer to the *πνεῦμα* (= spirit or Spirit). The term “spirit” may or may not be capitalized in English translation, depending on the translator’s preference, and refers either to the gift of the Holy Spirit or to the human spirit.

Scripture, but to some well-known proverb. Hence, Bo Reicke wants to make it refer to an epigram that has not survived.<sup>58</sup> Again, this seems doubtful. Why would a New Testament writer use an unqualified commonly shared idiom that referred to Sacred Scripture to refer to something else? Perhaps better is that James does not intend to quote any specific passage, but rather, he intends to summarize the general content of many passages in a single theological maxim.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the uncertainty about the citation in 4:5, James' following citation in 4:6 is clearly from Proverbs 3:34, a passage also quoted by Peter (cf. 1 Pe. 5:5). Divine grace is the privilege of the humble, those who have the true wisdom from heaven (cf. 3:13, 17). What James means by "the humble" is the same as what Jesus intended by "the poor in spirit": it refers to those who recognize their bankruptcy in heaven and their insufficiency without God. The greater the needs of God's people, the greater his supply of grace—but this grace presumes an attitude of humble submission to God's will. Believers, therefore, should willingly submit themselves to God's will (4:7a). Rather than seeking both the world and the Lord, they must resist the devil, causing him to flee. Pride is the hallmark of Satan but the antithesis of grace. If a person wants God to be against him, pride is the most certain means to this end. If one is to flee the devil, he is equally to draw near to God, knowing that the one who comes to God will never be turned away (4:8a; cf. Jn. 6:37). Under the old covenant, there were significant barriers separating the worshipper from God, but the triumph of the cross means that the way into the Most Holy Place has been opened by Christ (He. 4:16; 9:8; 10:19-22). The veil has been torn! Still, the ancient warnings about coming near to God in a state of uncleanness must not be ignored. Those with sin must purify themselves, and especially, they must purify their hearts when they are divided between mixed motives (4:8b).<sup>60</sup> Seeking both God and the world—an attitude of facing both ways—is a clear form of internal impurity. It may seem strange that James can refer to his readers as "brothers" as well as "sinners", but in fact, this is the case (cf. 1 Jn. 1:8). Cavalier laughter and careless rejoicing must give way to a true sense of grief and repentance (4:9; cf. Lk. 6:25b). Godly humility is what is

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<sup>58</sup> Reicke, p. 44, 46.

<sup>59</sup> So Tasker, p. 91; Williams, p. 126; Martin, p. 149; R. Wolff, *General Epistles of James & Jude* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1969), p. 69; D. Burdick, "James," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 12.194. Echoes of such a summary may have been suggested in Ge. 6:3-5; Ex. 20:5; 34:14; Nu. 35:34; Is. 63:8-16; Eze. 36:27; Zec. 1:14; 8:2.

<sup>60</sup> The words "wash your hands" derives from the ancient purification rituals of the priests (Ex. 30:19-21). James, therefore, uses the expression "wash your hands" in a metaphorical way to refer to their hearts. His words form a Hebrew parallelism where "hands" parallels "hearts" and "sinners" parallels "you double-minded".

needed, and when it is present, God will lift up the humble (4:10; cf. Job 22:29-30).

Finally, their differences notwithstanding, the various leaders and people who make up James' audience must refuse the sin of slandering each other (4:11a).<sup>61</sup> Talking another person down, what William Tyndale translated as "back-biting", is a primary demonstration of failure in the virtue of humility. To speak against one's brother in Christ is to pass judgment on him, the very thing Christ forbade (4:11b; cf. Mt. 7:1). Indeed, it is to pass judgment on God's royal law, which urges that one should love his neighbor as himself (4:11c; cf. 2:8). Christians are neither law-givers nor judges, at least in any eternal sense. That prerogative belongs to God alone! Only God can detect, convict and sentence those who disregard his laws (4:12a; Lk. 12:4-5). James addresses his final rhetorical question toward ordinary humans with their limited capacity of discernment: Who are they to pronounce judgment on their neighbors (4:12b)? By once again using the word "neighbor", he implicitly recalls the royal law he cited in 2:8: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

## **The False Confidence of Merchants (4:13-17)**

The next two pericopes are prefaced with the same "Come now" (or, "Now listen", so NIV, 4:13a; 5:1a). This introductory clause is a signal of warning, and it was popularly used in the Hellenistic world.<sup>62</sup> The first warning is given to business people who make advance commercial plans in order to make money (4:13). Jews in the Greco-Roman world were skilled merchants and traders, and it is hardly to be doubted that many Christian Jews of the Diaspora were business people as well (cf. Ac. 16:14; 18:1-3). James urges that all life and all earthly things are transient and short-lived. The allusion to tomorrow recalls the ancient wisdom of Israel that no one can boast about the future (4:14a; cf. Pro. 27:1), while the metaphor of the vanishing mist recalls Qoheleth's maxim, "Everything is vapor" (4:14b; Ecc. 1:2; 12:8). All plans must be prefaced within the context of God's will, who alone knows the future and is sovereign in the world (4:15). This perspective certainly is born out in the life of the early apostles (cf. 1 Co. 4:19, 16:7; He. 6:3). Advance claims about the future are symptoms of a misplaced

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<sup>61</sup> James uses the verb καταλάλέω (= to speak against). The issue is not whether the words against another are accurate (i.e., lying), but whether or not they are defaming. To justify slander by the excuse that it is truthful does not take the sting out of James' advice.

<sup>62</sup> Martin, p. 165.

confidence and are tantamount to bragging about something over which one has no control, like a quack doctor who makes huge claims but cannot actually heal anyone.<sup>63</sup> Hence, such boasting is inherently evil (4:16).

Therefore, the summary of everything James has been saying is that even sins of omission are grave. When one knows what should be done but refuses to do it, he sins just as surely as one who commits a deliberate act of sin. The ancient confession in the Book of Common Prayer is wholly appropriate when it says, “Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.” Once again, this maxim echoes the royal law of loving one’s neighbor as oneself.<sup>64</sup>

## The Warning to Rich Farmers (5:1-6)

If previously James warned those who set out to make money, here he warns those who already have money. That his intended targets are wealthy landowners is clear enough in 5:4. His scathing denunciation is issued in the same tone as the biting sermons of the eighth century prophets to Israel, and in fact, along the same lines (cf. Is. 5:8; Mic. 2:1-2). The future tense verbs culminate in the eschatological expression “the last days” (5:3b), the ancient expression by which the Hebrew prophets spoke of the day of reckoning at the end of the age.<sup>65</sup> The rich farmers should shriek and howl<sup>66</sup> in anticipation of the retribution that awaits them (5:1). Rich landowners, who frequently joined large tracts of cultivated land into huge monopolies, were able to control to a large degree the markets through volume production and price structuring. Small farmers were hard-pressed to compete in such a system, and especially in times of drought, the large land-owners could depend upon their reserves while forcing the market price to their own advantage. Small farmers were obliged to sell out to the larger concerns or take on risky loans at exorbitant interest. In time, the small farmers would

<sup>63</sup> In the ancient world, the term ἀλαζονεία was used of doctors, magicians, cooks, poets, philosophers and orators when they made promises they could not keep, cf. *TDNT* (1964) 1.226-227.

<sup>64</sup> That this is a maxim probably drawn from another source seems possible in that there is an obvious shift from the second person to the third person as well as the somewhat disconnectedness of the saying. If so, however, we do not know the source.

<sup>65</sup> D. Lewis, *3 Crucial Questions About the Last Days* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), pp. 30-34.

<sup>66</sup> The Greek verb ὀλολύζω (= to howl, cry out), used only here in the New Testament, is an example of onomatopoeia. However, the verbal effect is lost in translation.



become no more than share-croppers employed by a feudal master, who often enough, was an absentee owner.<sup>67</sup>

Nevertheless, the stockpiled reserves of the rich were no more than testimonies to coming judgment. Their three major commodities for measuring wealth—grains, garments and precious metals—were deteriorating. James uses a different verb for each: the riches from grain and corn were *σέσηπεν* (= rotten); wealth from the storage of garments was *σητόβρωτα* (= moth-eaten); gold and silver were *κατίωται* (= rusted over). Of course, technically gold and silver do not rust, but James is speaking eschatologically, and he intends to underscore the temporal nature of material, earthly goods (5:2-3a). Indeed, these stored goods, which deliberately were not used to assist those in need but reserved merely to elevate their price, would stand as testimonies in the last judgment. They not only were subject to deterioration, they would become like eschatological fire that consumed the very flesh of their owners (5:3b)! The wealthy landowners may have stored up wealth, but it would be a stockpile of earned judgment at the end. Unpaid wages became blood money, and this injustice cried out in condemnation (5:4a)! Almighty God<sup>68</sup> himself hears the pleas of those who are victims of such injustice (5:4b). Those who have withheld wages have done so in order to garnish their own opulent lifestyle, but while they grew fat by the deprivation of others, they would be fattened like livestock for the butcher (5:5). In effect, they had stooped to condemn and murder their own workers who were not resisting them (5:6). But, as old Black preacher put it, “Payday, someday!”

## Patience in the Face of Suffering (5:7-11)

If the last days meant judgment for the rich landowners, it equally meant relief for God’s faithful people who live in a hostile world. Christians, as Jesus made abundantly clear (cf. Mt. 24:36—25:13; Mk. 13:32-37; Lk. 21:34-36), do not know when the Lord will return, so they must await his coming with patient endurance (5:7a; cf. Rv. 1:9). The terms James uses are *μακροθυμέω* (= to bear up under provocation without complaint, to have patience, cf. 5:7-8) and *μακροθυμία* (= state of being able to bear up under provocation, patience, cf. 5:10), and he uses them no less than four times! The great example, of course, is the farmer who must wait for his crops to

<sup>67</sup> H. Kreissig, “Die landwirtschaftliche Situation im Palastina vor dem judaischen Krieg,” *Acta Antiqua* 17 (1969) pp. 241-247 as referenced in Martin, p. 170.

<sup>68</sup> Here James uses a transliterated Hebraism, *Yahweh Tsabaoth* (= Lord of Armies, Lord Almighty).

grow, patiently lasting through both the earlier/autumn rains and the later/spring rains (5:7b). The early rains are the time for plowing and sowing at the end of the dry season. The later rains provide the last moisture for the maturing of the cereal grains (cf. Dt. 11:14; Je. 5:24).<sup>69</sup> Like such a farmer, Christians also must patiently endure, fixing their hearts on the future (5:8a).<sup>70</sup> The unknown time of Christ's return means it always is imminent (5:8b). Complaining about current adverse circumstances certainly would not help, and in fact, grumbling against God's seeming delay, or worse, taking one's pain out on other brothers or sisters by finding fault with them will mean censure at the final judgment (5:9a). Hence, James says, "Look, the Judge stands before the doors" (5:9b)!<sup>71</sup>

Biblical history is not wanting for examples of such patience. The prophets of Israel who predicted the fall of Jerusalem and the exile waited many a long year before it happened, and they faced deeply entrenched opposition (5:10). Jesus said that the prophets were blessed for their endurance (cf. Mt. 5:11-12), and James could confidently assume that the whole Christian community was aware of this teaching by Jesus (5:11a). They also would have been aware of the great suffering and patience of Job as well as his restoration (5:11b; cf. Job 1-2, 42). Job discovered and was comforted by the truth that God cared for him (5:11c; cf. Job 42:5).

It should be observed that the patience of which James speaks is not simply quietude. Had that been his point, the examples of the prophets and Job would not have sufficed, for in both cases, there was considerable anguish, questioning and struggle in prayer. Jeremiah's confessions fully voice his personal pain and profound wrestling with God (Je. 11:20-23; 12:1-6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18). The interior of the Book of Job likewise is filled with deep spiritual probing. Patience in James view is a tenacious trust in God whatever the circumstances. It is trust in the midst of struggle—trust without immediate answers or immediate relief.

## **James' Important Closing (5:12-20)**

The expression "but above all" signals the closing of James' letter. This expression nearly carries the nuance of "finally", though obviously James also considers his closing to be of great importance.

<sup>69</sup> F. Frick, *ABD* (1992) 5.612.

<sup>70</sup> James uses the verb *στηρίζω* (= to establish, to fix firmly).

<sup>71</sup> Though the term "doors" is plural, most English translations make it a singular, since the singular more nearly approximates the common English idiom.

He begins by alluding to Jesus' teaching on oath-taking (cf. Mt. 5:33-37), and like Christ, he urges that oath-taking be eliminated from every day speech as proofs of integrity (5:12). It is not that oaths may not have their place (even Paul took oaths in critical situations, cf. 2 Co. 1:23; Ga. 1:20; Phil. 1:8), but that the flippancy with which people sometimes use oaths suggests that their statements, if uttered in an ordinary way, cannot be trusted. James words here are similar to Paul's, when he defended his change of travel plans (cf. 2 Co. 1:15-20).

The larger portion of the closing concerns prayer, sickness and confession of sin, the subject of suffering with which James began the letter (cf. 1:2, 12). Those afflicted should pray (5:13a). Those happy should sing (5:13b).<sup>72</sup> Those who are sick should call the church's elders for prayer (5:14a). The three verbs he uses and the appropriate imperative responses to each are distinct:

κακοπαθέω (= to suffer misfortune)  
 εὐθυμέω (= to be cheerful)  
 ἀσθενέω (= to be weak, bodily sick)

He focuses especially on the last circumstance, sickness. The summons to the church's elders means a summons to church leaders (cf. Ac. 11:30; 14:23; 15:2; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; 1 Ti. 5:17-19; Tit. 1:5; 1 Pe. 5:1; 2 Jn. 1; 3 Jn. 1). Possibly the sick person might be too ill to go to them, but in any case, it is the responsibility of the sick person to inform their pastors.<sup>73</sup> The elders will then anoint the sick person with oil in Christ's name and pray for their healing.<sup>74</sup>

Much discussion has attended the reference to the anointing with oil, which also can be found in the ministry of Jesus' disciples (cf. Mk. 6:13), though Jesus himself is never described as doing it. The interpretive question is whether the oil is medicinal or symbolic. Certainly oil was valued as a medicine in the ancient world, especially for sciatic pain, skin afflictions, headaches, wounds and so forth (cf. Lv. 14:18, 29; Is. 1:6; Je. 8:22; Lk. 10:34).<sup>75</sup> However, it also was used by the rabbis for exorcisms, and of

<sup>72</sup> When used in the LXX to translate from the Hebrew Psalter, this verb can mean to sing either with (Ps. 33:2-3; 98:4-5; 147:7; 149:3) or without (Ps. 7:17; 9:2, 11) instrumental accompaniment.

<sup>73</sup> Whether or not all elders are pastors is unclear, but at least the term "elder" is used in some passages as more-or-less synonymous with "pastor" (cf. Ac. 20:17, 28; 1 Pe. 5:1-2).

<sup>74</sup> Protestantism has not been very familiar with anointing the sick for healing until the advent of Pentecostalism. In the early and medieval church, however, this ritual was used with some regularity as a symbol of the Holy Spirit to provide healing and wholeness, and it was directly expressed in the 5<sup>th</sup> century Gelasian sacramental formula, cf. D. Engelhard, *ISBE* (1979) 1.129.

<sup>75</sup> H. Schlier, *TDNT* (1964) 1.230.

course, in the Old Testament it was symbolic of the ascension to office of priests and kings. Because of the paucity of New Testament references (the only two are cited above), interpreters have gone both ways. If medicinal, then the anointing with oil would be like taking an aspirin and praying, too. If symbolic, then the anointing with oil becomes a symbol of the power of the Spirit to heal. Further, there are two Greek words for anointing, ἀλείφω (used here by James) and χρίω. The latter of these two would more naturally express anointing for religious or symbolic reasons, but the former cannot be eliminated from such usage, since it was used in the LXX along with the latter word to describe the anointing of priests (cf. Ex. 40:15, LXX). Pentecostal-charismatics generally urge the symbolic interpretation, while many evangelicals urge the medicinal one. Even further afield is the Roman Catholic interpretation that this anointing is for last rites (extreme unction) for someone expected to die.<sup>76</sup> Because of the brevity of the description and the lack of references other than in Mark's Gospel, any interpreter should avoid dogmatism. In any case, James clearly says that it is the prayer of faith that saves the sick, not the anointing with oil, so he certainly does not envision any magical quality to the act of anointing.

Sometimes sickness is linked to sin (cf. 1 Chr. 26:16-20; Jn. 5:14; Ac. 12:21-23; 1 Co. 11:27-30), but this is never necessarily the case (Jn. 9:1-3). Hence, James says "if he has sinned," not "since he has sinned" (5:14b).<sup>77</sup> The multitudes of afflicted people who came to Jesus for healing in the gospels were treated with compassion as victims, not criminals. All that can be said is that *sometimes* sickness may be a direct result of sin. It is far more likely that most sickness is simply a part of the order of things in a fallen world. However, if the sickness is related to sin, the sin will be forgiven. Indeed, confession of sins is advocated, not simply to the elders as though they were special mediators, but directly to other fellow-believers, and probably, especially to anyone the sufferer might have wronged (5:16).<sup>78</sup> The effectiveness of prayer is not reserved for some special class, but any righteous person in the community who prays can offer effective, powerful prayers that God hears. There are, however, two interpretive possibilities in the participle ἐνεργουμένη (= being effective) in that this spelling of the verb could be either middle or passive voice. If it is a middle voice verb,

<sup>76</sup> R. McBrien, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 785-786.

<sup>77</sup> The use of καὶ (= and if) indicates that the sin is purely conditional.

<sup>78</sup> A similar injunction is offered in the early post-apostolic church as part of the Lord's Day and the celebration of Eucharist: "And on the Lord's own day gather yourselves together and break bread and give thanks, first confessing your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. And let no man, having his dispute with his fellow, join your assembly until they have been reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be defiled," *Didache* 14.

then the prayer offered would be mighty in what it is able to do. Here, the power of the prayer is in the righteous believer him/herself (so most English Versions). If it is in the passive voice, then the prayer offered would be mighty in what it is enabled to do. Here, the power of the prayer is in the Spirit who inspires the righteous believer, and J. B. Phillips translates, “Tremendous power *is made available* through a good man’s earnest prayer (emphasis mine).” Either way, the basic meaning is clear enough: righteous believers can effectively pray in behalf of those who are sick because of some sin they have committed. They will be forgiven!

James then offers Elijah as an example, his fourth Old Testament figure (cf. 2:21, 25; 5:11). Even though he was only human (lit., “a man of like feeling to us”), he confidently announced a drought for about three years (5:17-18; 1 Kg. 17:1; 18:1). While the Old Testament does not say Elijah prayed for the drought, he certainly prayed for the rain at the end (cf. 1 Kg. 18:36-37). Because of this, James can probably assume that he prayed at the beginning as well. Why James specifies three years and six months is unclear, since the Kings narrative is not quite so specific, but James likely was aware that Jesus also gave that same time period (Lk. 4:25).<sup>79</sup> Hence, if a believer strays from the true way and is restored by such effective prayer (and doubtless James has in mind that Elijah’s role was to turn the hearts of Israel back to God, cf. 1 Kg. 18:37b), then his readers should mark carefully that such restoration saves the sinner from death and hides a multitude of sins (5:19-20)! The verb *πλανάω* (= to wander) usually does not refer to someone who unconsciously falls into error, but rather, one who deliberately sets out in the wrong direction.<sup>80</sup> The idea of death is probably not merely physical death, but spiritual death. Whose sins are covered, the sinner himself or the one who turns him from error? The Greek text is ambiguous, and interpreters can be found to support both options. However, it seems more likely that the multitude of sins refers to those of the one reclaimed, since it should be assumed that the one seeking out the sinner to turn him back is, like Elijah, already righteous.

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<sup>79</sup> Some have even suggested that the three and a half years should be linked to the apocalyptic period described in the Book of Daniel and later recapped in the Revelation of John, but this suggestion seems more coincidental than deliberate without something in the context to offer support.

<sup>80</sup> Martin, p. 218.