

ANOTHER VIEW ON THE STRUCTURE OF JAMES

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Most scholars are convinced that the Epistle of James is a hodgepodge of loosely connected discourses on diverse subjects, a literary mosaic that lacks the continuity of thought necessary to qualify as a true epistle.¹ In the words of James W. Thompson:

It is composed primarily of self-contained sections that appear to be connected only loosely by catchwords (e.g., 1:4-5). Little sequence or development can be detected, as the author speaks authoritatively on a variety of subjects. The "epistle" is similar in form to such Jewish documents as Proverbs, Ecclesiasticus, and *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*.²

The purpose of this article is to suggest, contrary to this conventional wisdom, that James is a coherent pastoral letter written to strengthen and instruct impoverished Christians who were being oppressed by their rich neighbors.³ The movement of thought within the epistle is explained below by first providing a bare outline of the entire work and then discussing the particular sections. This is offered as a structural proposal, not as an exegesis of the text.

Outline of James

I. Greeting (1:1)

II. Encouragement and Instruction for Trials (1:2 - 2:13)

A. Encouragement to endure oppression by rich (1:2-12)

1. Maturing effect of trials (1:2-4)

¹Some notable exceptions are cited in Martin Dibelius, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, Hermeneia, rev. Heinrich Greeven, trans. Michael A. Williams (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 6, n.22, and Ralph P. Martin, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 48 (Waco, TX; Word Books, 1988) xcix – cii, but no proposed structure has fit the text snugly enough to gain widespread support.

²James W. Thompson, "James, the Letter of," in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 447.

³The circumstance of the addressees is clearly indicated in Jas. 1:2-3, 1:9-12, 2:5-7, and 5:1-11. As Guthrie concludes, "It would seem from this epistle that the believers were mainly poor. The allusions to the rich are more intelligible if these were unbelievers who were on the fringe of the church and were taking advantage of their wealth and influence to intimidate the poor Christians. At the same time rich men must at times have attended the Christian synagogues, otherwise the discussion in chapter 2 would not be relevant." Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 748. See also, Peter H. Davids, *Commentary on James*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 32-34 and Douglas J. Moo, *James*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 30-33.

- 2. Availability of needed wisdom (1:5-8)
- 3. Contrasting positions and fates (1:9-12)
- B. Warning against slandering God during trials (1:13-18)
 - 1. Not ascribing evil intent to God (1:13-15)
 - 2. God seeking only our good (1:16-18)
- C. Call to be doers of the word during trials (1:19 - 2:13)
 - 1. With regard to hostility toward oppressors (1:19-27)
 - a. Anger toward oppressors (1:19-25)
 - b. Evil speech toward oppressors (1:26-27)
 - 2. With regard to preference toward rich (2:1-13)
 - a. Problem identified (2:1-4)
 - b. Foolishness of favoring the rich (2:5-7)
 - c. Seriousness of the sin (2:8-13)
- III. Defense of call to works in light of error (2:14-26)
 - A. Error of "faith only" shown from everyday example (2:14-17)
 - B. Error of "faith only" shown from fate of demons (2:18-19)
 - C. Error of "faith only" shown from Scripture (2:20-26)
- IV. Caution about role of teacher in light of error (3:1-5a)
 - A. Stricter judgment and potential for error (3:1-2)
 - B. Great effect of teaching on church (3:3-5a)
- V. Call to harmony among believers (3:5b - 4:12)
 - A. Cursing (3:5b-12)
 - B. Envy and rivalry (3:13-18)
 - C. Conflicts and quarrels (4:1-3)
 - D. Call to submit to God (4:4-10)
 - E. Command not to speak against one another (4:11-12)
- VI. Criticism of the wealthy (4:13 - 5:6)
 - A. Rebuke of believers neglecting poor believers (4:13-17)
 - B. Fate of unbelievers oppressing poor believers (5:1-6)
- VII. Encouragement to stand firm during oppression by rich (5:7-11)
- VIII. Concluding remarks (5:12-20)
 - A. Instruction not to swear (5:12)
 - B. Instruction re suffering, cheer, and illness (5:13-18)
 - C. Encouragement to correct the erring (5:19-20)

Discussion of Sections

In 1:2-12 James encourages his readers to endure the trials they are undergoing at the hands of rich oppressors by reminding them of the spiritual benefits that accompany such trials (1:2-4),⁴ by assuring them that the wisdom needed in such times is available through the prayer

⁴Compare Rom. 5:2b-5 and 1 Pet. 1:6-7; see also Heb. 12:7-11.

of faith (1:5-8),⁵ and by comparing their exalted position and glorious future with the low position and bleak future of their oppressors (1:9-12).⁶

He then, in 1:13-18, warns his audience not to slander God in the midst of their trials by claiming that he is trying to induce them to sin (1:13).⁷ If they sin, it is not because God willed it (1:14-15);⁸ he seeks only to bless them (1:16-18).⁹

⁵According to Dibelius, vs. 5 has no logical relationship to vss. 2-4 but is simply stitched to them by the catchwords *λειπόμενοι* and *λείπεται* (Dibelius, 70). Though Dibelius summarily dismisses the work of several earlier scholars who saw a connection between these verses in the fact that wisdom is especially needed in times of testing (Ibid., n. 3), Davids has confirmed that those with a Jewish background would be inclined to pray for wisdom in a testing situation because they would see wisdom as a key to enduring the trials of this age (Davids, 71-72). As Martin notes, "The readers are facing some real problems arising from persecution, and it is the gift and application of wisdom to see these trials in their proper light and respond accordingly" (Martin, 17). See also Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude*, The Anchor Bible, Vol. 37 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) 14, and Donald W. Burdick, "James" in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 12:168-169.

The case for a logical connection between vss. 2-4 and vs. 5 is further supported by the presence of the introductory *δέ* in 1:5, a fact Dibelius ignores. When he addresses the presence of the introductory *δέ* in 1:9, he employs circular reasoning to conclude that it has no logical significance (Dibelius, 83-84). Since he can find no continuity of thought from 1:8 to 1:9, he denies *δέ* its usual connective force.

⁶The hope of an eschatological reversal is a common method of encouraging those undergoing persecution (e.g., Jas. 5:1-6; Phil. 1:28-29; 2 Thess. 1:3-10; Revelation 18-22). Davids, 76-77, and Martin 25-26, identify *ὁ πλούσιος* as a rich unbeliever and recognize the eschatological reversal motif in vss. 9-11.

Dibelius's opinion that James probably did not intend to equate the lowly brother (*ὁ ἀδελφὸς ὁ ταπεινός*) in vs. 9 with the brother undergoing trials in vss. 2-4 derives from his belief that there is no continuity in thought between vss. 2-4 and vss. 5-8. In his analysis, vss. 5-8 form a chasm between vs. 9 and vss. 2-4 rather than a bridge, which makes it unlikely that James attempted the leap (Dibelius, 70-71).

That James is still addressing the oppression of his readers is indicated by the fact vs. 12 pronounces an eternal blessing on those who endure a trial. Contra Dibelius, 88, and most commentators, this beatitude properly belongs with vss. 9-11 as the parallel to the fate of the rich unbeliever. Structurally, James mentions the status of the lowly brother (vs. 9 - *ὑψεῖ αὐτοῦ*), the status of the rich man (vs. 10a - *ταπεινώσει αὐτοῦ*), the fate of the rich man (vss. 10b-11 - *παρελεύσεται* and *μαρανθήσεται*), and the fate of the lowly brother (vs. 12 - *λήμψεται τὸν στέφανον τῆς ζωῆς*). Though his understanding of vss. 9-11 differs, Burdick agrees that vs. 12 is related to the preceding verses rather than to the following (Burdick, 170).

⁷In the midst of persecution, one can easily feel that God has become an enemy, that he is trying to force one from the holy way. James accordingly warns those "being tested" or "undergoing trials" (*πειραζόμενος*) not to say they are "being tempted" (*πειράζομαι*) by God. *Πειράζω* has both the good sense of testing and the bad sense of tempting, and this distinction must be recognized here. (Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., rev. William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979] 640). God permits hardships in the life of a believer, but he never does so with hostile motives, for the purpose of leading the believer into evil. See Moo, 71-72. To say otherwise is blasphemous.

⁸Rather (*δέ* having a disjunctive sense), it is because they failed to control their own desires (see 1 Cor. 10:13), a problem that can ultimately lead to spiritual death. Thus contra Dibelius, 90, vss. 13-15 have much to do with the afflictions in vs. 12. The mere fact there are cognate words in vs. 12 and vs. 13 (*πειρασμόν* and *πειραζόμενος*) does not mean there is no unity (Davids, 80-81).

In 1:19 - 2:13 James calls his readers to be doers of the word, specifically with regard to the sins prompted by their oppression, namely, anger (1:19-25) and evil speech (1:26-27) toward their oppressors and fear-based preference toward the rich (2:1-13).¹⁰ The explanation in 1:20 (note γὰρ) of the proverbial saying in 1:19b¹¹ makes clear that anger is the focus of James's concern.¹² It must be avoided because it is contrary to the righteousness of God. Therefore (διὸ), having initially renounced all evil when they received the gospel,¹³ they must continue on that path with regard to their anger; they must continue to humbly submit to the ethical demands of the implanted word (1:21),¹⁴ to the law of freedom that calls them to love their neighbor as themselves.¹⁵ Those who ignore that obligation are deceiving themselves about their standing before God. It is of no value to become aware of what one needs to do if one promptly forgets it, i.e., fails to act upon it (1:22-25).

The addressees apparently magnified the sin of their oppressors, the failure to care for the poor, while minimizing or ignoring their own contamination by the world in the form of anger and evil speech.¹⁶ James bursts their delusion of piety, their perception of themselves as

⁹The point is that they must not allow the pain of their trials to deceive them about God's commitment to their welfare (as 1:13 suggests was a danger). God is not an adversary; he is the source of every good act of giving and of every perfect gift, the ultimate expression of which was the gift of their new birth through the gospel. He is their supreme benefactor, and his commitment to their welfare is unchanging because he himself is unchanging. See Moo, 74-77.

¹⁰James does not state that these sins are oppression related, but that is a reasonable conclusion. As Davids says regarding his hypothesized *Sitz im Leben*, "On the one hand, the church naturally felt resentment against the rich. . . . On the other hand, if a wealthy person entered the church or was a member, there would be every reason to court him" (Davids, 33). One would not expect James to refer to his readers' oppression in this context because it does not diminish their personal responsibility for sin (1:14-15) and is therefore not relevant to his call to repent.

¹¹Dibelius, 111-112, and Davids, 91-92, discuss the form of the saying.

¹²As Davids, 92, recognizes.

¹³Taking the aorist participle ἀποθέμενοι (vs. 21) as circumstantial rather than imperatival.

¹⁴As Davids observes, "The call to receive the word of the gospel which they have already implanted in them sounds contradictory. But the stock characteristic of the language of receiving the word (meaning accepting and acting on it, as in the examples above) and the fact that the gospel consists of both a word about Jesus and ethical content (which is James's main concern; [citation omitted]) point to the sense of 'act upon the word you accepted at conversion' (or baptism, if one accepts Mussner's baptismal context)" (Davids, 95). See also, Martin, 48-49.

¹⁵The law of freedom (νόμος ἐλευθερίας) in 1:25 and 2:12 is called the royal law (νόμος βασιλικός) in 2:8 and is there identified with the scripture "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." This is the command Christ singled out as a summary of interpersonal ethical obligations (Matt. 22:34-40). See Moo, 93-94, with Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1980; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987) 107-110.

¹⁶This explains James's emphasis on their being doers of the word rather than hearers only (1:22-24) and the references to their self deception (1:22, 1:26).

θηροκόος (1:26), by reminding them that pure and undefiled religion involves not only caring for the poor (epitomized by orphans and widows¹⁷) but also keeping oneself unspotted by the world (1:27).¹⁸

Some in James's audience, fearing the power of the wealthy, carried their favor even to the point of showing them preference when they appeared at meetings of the church (2:1-4).¹⁹ This was not only foolish, given that, in general, the poor were Christians and the rich were the ones oppressing them (2:5-7), but it was also a very serious sin (2:8-13). Even if they kept the royal law (see note 15) on every other occasion, that would not lessen their guilt in violating it with regard to partiality. The royal law, like the Mosaic law, is kept or broken as a unit (2:8-11).²⁰ They must speak and act in accord with this law of freedom (2:12) because those who reject the ethics of faith, such as by not showing mercy to the poor, reject faith itself and the mercy that faith receives (2:13).²¹

Having strongly called his readers to be doers of righteousness with regard to their neighbors, both rich and poor, James defends that call against a circulating false doctrine, probably based on a misunderstanding of Paul's teaching, that works are irrelevant or insignificant for those in Christ (2:14-26).²² He shows the error of that doctrine from an everyday example (2:14-17),²³ from the fate of demons (2:18-19),²⁴ and from Scripture (2:20-26).²⁵

¹⁷"It is also clear that [orphans and widows] were typical examples . . . for all who suffer distress and oppression" (Davids, 103). See also Moo, 86.

¹⁸Dibelius assumes that the repetition of *θηροκόος* in v. 26 and v. 27 indicates that v. 27 is a supplemental attachment (Dibelius, 108), but one would expect the word to be repeated in a direct contrast between worthless and pure *θηροκόος*.

¹⁹Moo remarks, "Apparently the oppression they were experiencing at the hands of the rich (*cf.* vv. 6-7) had led . . . to an excessive deference towards the rich and powerful that resulted in a slighting and demeaning of poorer people" (Moo, 87).

²⁰The royal law viewed as a body of particulars encompassed by the summary command "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

²¹Dibelius's contends that the only connection between vs. 13 and vs. 12 is the occurrence of the catchwords *κρίνεσθαι* and *κρίσις*. This is based on his incorrect belief that discriminating against the poor cannot fairly be characterized as a failure to show mercy (*ποιεῖν ἔλεος*) (Dibelius, 147). As Moo says, "'Showing mercy' is, in fact, just what the love command requires (vs. 8) and what James' readers are failing to do when they 'dishonour the poor man'. This relationship between mercy and concern for the poor is explicit in Zechariah 7:9-10" (Moo, 98).

²²The presence of this false doctrine among the addressees is attested by the questions posed in 2:14 and 2:20 and by the interlocutor's statement in 2:18. The error may have had few adherents, but James addresses it because it directly contradicts his teaching in 1:19 - 2:13, especially in 1:21-27 and 2:8-13, on the necessity of obedience. As for the relationship of this error to Paul's teaching, see, D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 412-413.

²³Just as lip service to the poor is of no value, a truth they probably knew all too well, so faith without works is dead.

The presence of this error prompts James to issue a caution regarding teachers. The fact of stricter judgment, combined with the great potential for error, means that not many should become teachers in the formal sense (3:1-2). Teaching in the church is a grave responsibility because it (the small tongue) directs the spiritual course of the entire community (3:3-5a).²⁶

James uses his reference to the tongue's influence to turn the discussion to the division among his readers. The tongue is not only influential, it is also very destructive, and in their case it was being used to curse one another (3:5b-10a).²⁷ This should not occur in the family of God (3:10b-12).

Continuing his instruction regarding sins of division, James warns his readers about envy and rivalry, sins that were apparently being cloaked with a claim of wisdom.²⁸ Those who are wise and understanding of the things of God will exhibit that wisdom in humble behavior (3:13). Those with envy and rivalry in their hearts have no business boasting of being wise; in doing so, they contradict the truth that wisdom breeds humility (3:14). Whatever wisdom such people claim to possess, it is not heavenly but unspiritual and demonic (3:15). Whereas envy and rivalry result in disorder and every evil practice, true wisdom is marked by qualities that lead to harmony and righteousness (3:16-18).²⁹

The conflicts and quarrels occurring among his readers are rooted in the envy and jealousy that spring from unfulfilled desires (4:1-2b), but it is their own fault that they do not have what they want. To the extent that their unfulfilled desires are for things needed to serve and glorify God, they do not have because they do not ask God to provide them (4:2c).³⁰ To the

²⁴Demons believe in the Jewish confession that God is one, that there is only one Almighty God, but because they are unwilling to act accordingly, that belief is inadequate to save them. Instead, they are left to shudder in fear.

²⁵The faith of both Abraham and Rahab found expression in their conduct.

²⁶See Martin, 110-112.

²⁷It seems that the division was, at least to some extent, stimulated by their oppression. Jas. 5:9 puts their grumbling against one another in that context. As Davids says regarding his hypothesized *Sitz im Leben*, "The class warfare outside the church led to the struggles between the Zealots and the pro-Roman parties. Within the church it would lead to complaining, bitterness, and party struggles, . . ." (Davids, 33-34).

²⁸This is suggested by the opening question in 3:13 and by the denial in 3:15 that "this" (αὐτή - the alleged wisdom) is the wisdom from above.

²⁹Dibelius sees 3:18 as another independent saying perhaps stitched to what precedes by the occurrence of καρπῶν and καρπός (Dibelius, 208), but even if he is correct (contra Martin, 126), that does not alter the fact 3:18 is a suitable conclusion to the section. See Davids, 155.

³⁰The subdivision of vs. 2 is based on the following translation: "You want and do not have, so you kill and are filled with jealousy; you are unable to obtain, so you quarrel and wage war. You do not have because you do not ask God."

extent that their unfulfilled desires are for things to indulge their pleasures, they do not have, despite asking God for them, because God does not honor such selfishly motivated requests (4:3).

In 4:4-10 James issues a clear call to repent of all such sin. His readers had embraced the hostility and divisiveness of the world, thereby being unfaithful to God, and seemingly were oblivious to their spiritual infidelity.³¹ He tells them plainly that whoever decides to befriend the world is made an enemy of God, for Scripture does not speak in vain when it says God is a jealous God (4:4-5a).³²

Yet, despite their (characteristically human) affair with the world through envy and its related evils, God is willing and able to provide grace sufficient to overcome that sinfulness (4:5b-6a).³³ They must shake off the self-righteousness engendered by their perceived superiority to their oppressors and humble themselves before the Lord. Humility before the Lord is the condition for receiving his overcoming grace (4:6b-10).

As fruit of that humbling, they must cease speaking against one another.³⁴ To put down a brother or sister is to criticize and judge the royal law which forbids such things.³⁵ Those who sit in judgment of the law are not doing the law, not submitting to it, but putting themselves above it as judges (4:11). God is the only legitimate lawgiver and judge. They have no business usurping his role (4:12).

³¹Thus the biting question of v. 4a. This is consistent with the moral blind spot this article suggests they exhibited with regard to their sins of anger and evil speech (see discussion of 1:19-27).

³²The question in v. 5a (following punctuation of Laws, 174: "Or do you think that the Scripture speaks in vain?") is understood to refer to the theme of divine jealousy as expressed in such passages as Ex. 20:5, 34:14; Zech. 8:2. See Moo, 146.

³³Following James Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 170-71, and Laws, 176-78, in understanding πνεῦμα as the subject of 4:5b and in identifying it with the human spirit. Thus, "The spirit which he caused to dwell in us longs enviously, but he gives greater grace" (4:5b-6a).

³⁴Καταλαλέω refers broadly to speaking against another person. Its essence is the hostility and malice of the speech, not the falsity of it. (Gerhard Kittel, "καταλαλέω" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967] 4:4). As Moo points out, "'speaking evil' (*katalalia*) is often linked to 'jealousy' (*zēlos*) (2 Cor. 12:20; 1 Pet. 2:1), 'selfishness' (2 Cor. 12:20), quarrels (*polemas* in Psalms of Solomon 12:3) and pride (Testament of Gad 3:3), . . ." (Moo, 151). It thus serves well to epitomize the division among the addressees, the topic that has occupied James from 3:5b.

³⁵The reference to "neighbor" in 4:12 suggests it is the royal law ("You shall love your neighbor as yourself") that is under discussion (Laws, 187).

In 4:13 - 5:6 James criticizes the wealthy, both in and out of the church, for their treatment of the poor believers.³⁶ In 4:13-17 he addresses those wealthy believers who, as demonstrated by the certainty with which they spoke of their business plans, lived under the belief they were guaranteed tomorrow (4:13).³⁷ He exposes this as an arrogant delusion (4:14-15), not only because it is sinful (4:16) but also to eliminate it as a justification for putting off doing the good they knew to do (i.e., helping their poorer brothers). Since, contrary to their view, tomorrow is uncertain, they are sinning by delaying such good works (4:17).³⁸

In 5:1-6 he announces the fate of the unbelievers who are oppressing the poor believers.³⁹ They so love money that they are willing to abuse and exploit God's people to obtain and preserve it; in the end they will be condemned.

After encouraging the believers to stand firm in view of their ultimate and (potentially) imminent vindication vis-à-vis their rich oppressors (5:7-11),⁴⁰ James instructs them not to swear (5:12). Perhaps the poor Christians were tempted to swear to bolster their credibility when the powerful oppressors lied to cover the fact they were cheating and exploiting them.⁴¹

James then calls his readers to pray during times of suffering, cheer, and illness and reinforces that call by reminding them of the power of Elijah's prayers (5:13-18). He concludes by encouraging the believers to correct those among them who had wandered from the truth, precisely what he had been doing throughout the epistle (5:19-20).⁴²

³⁶The change in subject is marked by the abrupt ἄγε νῦν οἱ λέγοντες in 4:13. The repetition of ἄγε νῦν in 5:1 supports the proposal that in these two sections James is addressing different groups on a common subject.

³⁷That those addressed in 4:13-17 are probably Christians is recognized by Davids, 171; Moo, 154; and Burdick, 197.

³⁸Following the suggestion of Laws, 193-94.

³⁹"5:1-6 unmistakably addresses non-Christians. This is clear both from the many biblical and extra-biblical traditions concerning unrighteous wealth that James utilizes, and from James' failure to hold out any prospect of deliverance for those whom he condemns in this paragraph" (Moo, 159). The fate of these wealthy oppressors is revealed as an encouragement to the oppressed, similar to what was done in 1:10-11.

⁴⁰The connection with 5:1-6 is clearly marked by οὐν.

⁴¹One can grant that the reference to oaths is dictated by the epistolary form (Davids, 181) and still believe it is tailored to the specific situation of the addressees. As Moo notes, the introductory Πρὸ πάντων δέ appears to suggest some connection with the previous context (Moo, 173).

⁴²According to Davids, the last three paragraphs of the letter (vss. 12, 13-18, 19-20) "are dictated by the epistolary form and thus speak respectively of oaths, a health wish, and the purpose of writing, all of which one would expect in the literary epistle and which are also found in the endings of 1 John and Hebrews" (Davids, 181).