

James

Some passages of James – especially the ones on the tongue, faith and works, and the origin of temptation – are very well known and often discussed. But taken as a whole the letter of James is relatively challenging to analyse as James’ style is to present a topic, move away from it, and then return to it again. But this is a challenge only to an analyst of the letter. James wasn’t writing for scholars; he was writing to encourage people to be doers of the word, disciples who would be eager to fulfil the Royal Law of Christ. For them there is an abundance of practical advice.

First, though, there are a few background matters to address. Let’s begin with the first verse, which raises the two questions of Who? and To whom?

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered abroad. Greeting.” (James 1:1)

There are three common proposals regarding the identity of this James. He is either:

- James, the Lord’s brother.
- James the son of Zebedee, the brother of John, and one of the ‘sons of thunder’.
- Some other James, or someone masquerading as one of the previous two.

As is often the case with such questions, however, the resolving of this issue makes relatively little difference to the interpretation of the letter. The fiery language of certain parts of the letter

(particularly in chapters 4 and 5, but elsewhere as well), coupled with the emphasis on the importance of patience, being ‘slow to speak’ and bridling the tongue would resonate nicely with the James of option 2, but other than this it matters relatively little. Whoever the human author, the book is part of the inspired canon of Scripture.

The Audience

The question of James’ audience, by contrast, does lead into a very interesting area of interpretation. The greeting, remarkably brief by the standards of other NT letters, refers to the ‘twelve tribes scattered abroad’. This suggests pretty clearly the Jews of the diaspora (it might be just possible to interpret the expression metaphorically of spiritual Jews, but this would scarcely seem the natural reading). We do not know whether he is writing to Jews in a particular geographic area; but this lack of specificity only enhances the letter’s broad appeal.

Fifteen times during the course of the epistle James addresses his readers as ‘brethren’, ‘my brethren’, and, quite frequently, ‘my beloved brethren’. Again, the natural reading is that he is writing to believers in Christ (as opposed to Jews who are still operating under the old covenant), but his use of the term ‘brethren’ has an extra dimension because his audience are natural ethnic brethren (Jews), as well as spiritual brethren (believers). If the letter is quite early then these Jewish believers might have still been worshipping in the synagogue rather than in separate ecclesias. Some have painted a scenario in which significant animosity has erupted between the two groups within the synagogue (those who accept Christ and those who don’t), and that the parting of the ways between the two has not yet happened. Some of James’ acerbic comments (which we shall get to in a second) are thus directed against the unbelieving synagogue members, it is claimed, for the letter would have been read in the synagogue before both groups.

The problem – and the reason why such a proposal has been put forward – is that in a number of passages James takes his readers to task in very strong language. While he calls them ‘my

The Main Topics

- Persecutions and trials; the nature of temptation
- Patience and perseverance
- Law – old versus new
- The tongue; how to speak appropriately
- Relationships – avoiding strifes and partiality
- Faith without works is dead
- Prayer – how to ask, and what to ask for
- Riches, pride and humility; having and not having

beloved brethren' and the like on those fifteen occasions, he also calls his readers:

- You adulterers and adulteresses! (4:4)
- You sinners (4:8)
- You double-minded (4:8)
- You rich (5:1)

Notice that these are all in the second person ('you'). He is not writing about some other group (what 'they' are doing); he is addressing (or appears to be addressing) his audience. Is this really what his Christian brethren are like, and even if they have certain sinful tendencies (which we all do), is this any way to address them?! Something very interesting is going on.

Murderers!

Furthermore, he goes on to say the following about them:

"But you have dishonoured the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court?"
(2:6)

"What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? ... You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel ... You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."
(4:1-3)

"Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town...' As it is, you boast in your arrogance."
(4:13,16)

"Weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted ... your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire." (5:1-3)

"The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you ... You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you

have murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.”
(5:4-6)

Again, the choice of words here is staggering – diluted, if at all, only by familiarity. Were the brethren really fighting, lusting and even killing? And if not, why talk like this? So problematic is the language that there are at least four different options for interpreting it:

- The brethren were literally doing these things (though this is hard to believe).
- The ‘ye’ refers not to the brethren but to their Jewish opponents, the Judaizers (but James is not writing to them, so why does he call them ‘ye’? It could be a reference to their ‘Jewish heritage’ – this is what Jews have done since OT times. There would certainly be OT parallels, but since James is also a Jew, would he not say ‘we’?)
- As a modification to 2) (and as already suggested), could it be that James is writing to a synagogue audience, some of whom are Christians and some not? If so, these comments could be directed at those who had not accepted Christ.
- The language is chosen to wake readers up to the forces of human nature which are in all people, including ourselves as brothers and sisters. The enmity, warring and lusting is what has grown out of Genesis 3 (which the language echoes).

I favour the last approach – that James is describing what humans are like, and that we too, even though we have accepted Christ, have the potential to behave in this way unless we are very careful. James uses such strong language to alert readers to the real dangers of sin if they allow their human inclinations to rule them. Passages like 2:1-6 suggest they have started to go down such a path, so there is need for a stern warning about where it will take them. There seem to be decent reasons within the text for adopting this approach, although this is not the place to go into detail. It would mean that it is not necessary to postulate whether or not the ecclesia is still part of the synagogue.

Strong Language

This panel provides further material on the strongly-worded passages from chapters 4 and 5. Notice, first of all, the word-families James chooses. The language of fighting:

- Wars, fightings, war (4:1)
- Kill, fight, war (4:2)
- Consume (4:3)
- Enmity (NIV 'hatred'), enemy (4:4)
- Resist (4:7), destroy (4:12)

The language of lust:

- Lusts (4:1)
- Lust, desire (4:2)
- Lusts (4:3)
- Adulterers, adulteresses, (friendship, friend) 4:4
- Lusteth, envy (4:5)

All this is very appropriate to talk about sin and human behaviour, about man's potential for animosity, violence, coveting, materialism, and uncontrolled appetite (sexual or otherwise). These are some of the most powerful forces and motivations which can be awakened within human beings. Thought about like this, the passage becomes one of the most remarkable depictions of the power of sin to be found within the Scriptures.

But the vocabulary-cake can also be cut a different way. All the action is frantic and extreme, and much of it revolves around the axis of push-pull. Humans tend to be all about 'me, me, me', so James uses the language of:

- Grabbing
- Desiring
- Having
- Obtaining
- Receiving
- Consuming

By using this language James captures eloquently the unbridled and self-centred human appetite.

Perhaps the most incredible thing about 4:1-8 comes in verse 6 when James makes a sudden contrast. If this grab-and-get human nature is as strong as James indicates, what can be done about it? The verse explains: "But He giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble." (James 4v6)

The 'taking' which was so characteristic of man is transformed by the 'giving' of God. Notice that the verb 'give' is used twice and is the direct opposite of all the grabbing, having, lusting, fighting, obtaining and consuming that dominated the first five verses of chapter 4. God's concern is with others, whereas man's had been only with himself. Man had thought it was his right and duty to get as much for himself as he possibly could, with no concern for anyone else. God's grace, utterly transcendent of all this, is neither deserved, nor is there automatic title to it.

In fact, this give/take vocabulary seems to be part of a wider network which runs right through the letter. It would make a fascinating study to examine the use of all the related terms: give/gift, take, lack, ask, receive – and also the notion of being perfect, whole, complete (i.e. lacking nothing, having everything which is required).

A little clue comes in 2:20 when James writes 'Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?' (ESV). He is not addressing a particular individual here; it is a rhetorical strategy in which James takes to task an imaginary opponent. The literary form is known as a diatribe (Paul

uses it in Romans 2), and one could perhaps see the references quoted above from chapters 4 and 5 in a similar light.

Indeed, it is very interesting that most of the ‘problematic’ passages where James uses this strong language in the second person are to be found between 4:1-8 and 5:1-6 (notice the contrast when James flips out of this style in 5:7). This supports the suggestion that James is adopting a special technique in these passages to convey his point with particular force. He then reverts to his ‘normal’ style (which is still pretty punchy, it has to be said!) in the rest of the letter. More analysis of chapters 4 and 5 is included in the Panel.

Law, Judgment, Faith and Works

Given that James’ audience is Jewish, one might have expected that he would be dealing with issues of ritual, circumcision and the like, much as Paul has to in Galatians, and, to a lesser extent, throughout his letters. But this is not really the case. The temptation to go backwards to be enslaved by ritual and letter does not seem to be a significant one for James’ readers. Instead, most of the matters he addresses are to do with practical discipleship (patience in persecution, riches, prayer, the tongue, and so forth). If the letter is quite early, then it may be that these dangers which Paul confronts had not yet really surfaced. Alternatively, the absence of these issues might be explained on a geographic basis (was James writing to disciples in an area where these problems simply hadn’t showed up?), or, perhaps, because the Judaising infiltration was a particular campaign targeted at ecclesias established by Paul.

Furthermore, we might expect that when James comes to deal with the ‘faith and works’ issue he would have to advise his audience (being Jewish and once steeped in the performing of ritual) that they should concentrate on faith (wouldn’t works come rather more naturally to them?). But again, this is not the case. The danger is rather more that they see the way of faith as a liberation from behavioural controls! James’ response to this – that it is impossible to manifest true faith without corresponding works – is well known. Works are the natural outflow of faith.

(The emphasis on works occurs throughout the letter: see 1:22-23,25,27; 2:14-26; 3:13; 4:11)

Some of the concepts James speaks of do have clear Jewish connections, however, though even here his thrust is not really a polemical one. There are a number of references to judgment (2:6,13; 4:11; 5:9), and also important references to law (1:25; 2:8-12; 4:11).

I want to explore James' treatment of the Law in a little more detail. There are two aspects to it. On the one hand he talks of the old Law – the Law of Moses. No one wants to fall foul of the Law, he points out, and yet failure in just one aspect of it makes one a transgressor of the entire institution: “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.” (2:10).

Set against these comments about the old Law and its ‘trap-like’ nature (if you fall in one point, it has you), are references to the new Law of Christ. James has three unique and wonderful expressions to describe it, one of which (‘the law of liberty’ – a delightful oxymoron) is used twice:

- The perfect law, the law of liberty (1:25)
- The royal law (2:6)
- The law of liberty (2:12)

Prayer, Trial and Persecution

Although it is hard to discern an elaborate or even a broad structure to James' message, it is noticeable that the letter does begin and end on a similar note, and in doing so brings to attention two important themes.

After his brief greeting in 1:1, James ploughs straight into one of his key exhortations:

“My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience, but let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.” 1:2-4

He acknowledges that trials will come in many and varied forms

Watch what you say

(Quotes are taken from the ESV)

“Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires.” (1:19-20)

“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.” (1:26)

“So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.” (2:12)

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.” (3:1-2)

“The tongue is a small member, yet boasts of great things ... the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell ... no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” (3:3-13)

“If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.” (3:14)

“Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law.” (4:11)

“You boast in your arrogance. You ought to say ‘if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that...’ (4:13-16)

“Do not grumble against one another, brothers...” (5:9)

“But above all, my brothers, do not swear ... but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no.” (5:12)

(persecution is but one), but that these should be met with enthusiasm because they contain the potential to develop the spiritual quality of patience which, in turn, rounds out the disciple’s character.

The term patience is one of the key words of James. In fact there are two Greek words which underlie the KJV’s one term ‘patience’. One is used in 1:3,4,12; 5:11 (translated either as a variant of ‘patient’ or ‘endure’, Strong 5281 from 5278 – the emphasis is more on grit, endurance, tenacity), and another occurs in 5:7,8,10 (Strong 3116 – the emphasis is on longsuffering).

James continues to extol the virtue of patience in trials in 1:12, and then moves from the topic of trials to discuss the nature of temptation in 1:13-17, pointing out that God’s designs for us are entirely good.

It is not until the final chapter that patience is brought up again (5:7-8,10-11,13). The scriptural pioneers of Job and the prophets are brought forward as prime examples of patience under trial, with the term ‘patience’ being used five times in those verses.

The other topic which is shared between chapters 1 and 5 is that of prayer (there is also a reference in 4:2-3 about mis-prayer). James immediately follows his opening exhortation on patience with the injunction: ‘If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God...’ (1:5-6), and chapter 5 closes with a much more extended reference to the power and applications of prayer (5:13-18), with the Scriptural prototype here being the prayers of Elijah whose prayers withheld even the rains of heaven.

The tongue, riches, and relationships

Aside from the famous passage about the tongue in 3:2-13, James makes a lot of other comments about the importance of what one says and how one says it. These references run right through the letter, and are picked out in the Panel. It is one of the letter's most prominent themes. Another key theme is that of pride and riches (the relevant passages are: 1:9-11; 2:1-6; 2:15; 3:14,16; 4:1-10; 4:13,16; 5:1-6).

What one says has a large bearing interpersonal relationships, since no-one talks into a vacuum. This theme can be seen from some of the references in the panels – the one on the tongue and the one on strong language. In a moment we shall come to James' treatment of pride and riches. One of the consequences of the sin of pride and the love of riches is that it so easily impacts how we treat other people. James deals with the topics of the exploitation of others (take a look at the references in chapters 4 and 5); his readers seem not to have been immune from such behaviour or the temptation of it. He also tackles partiality in 2:1-9 – another example of interpersonal relationships gone awry – jealousy in 3:14; 4:5, and murmuring against brethren in 5:9.

But the exhortation is not all in the negative. It is not all about what one should not do. The letter of James contains many powerful exhortations, and in conclusion here are two thoroughly positive ones:

“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” (1:27)

“Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another... My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.” (5:16,19,20)

Other ideas (for future development)

Wisdom theme

Speak vs receive

Works references

Patience analysis