

JAMES, THE WISDOM OF JESUS

JOHN A. BURNS
Criswell College, Dallas, TX 75201

I. *Introduction*

The Scope and Purpose

When the Epistle of James is studied, it is regarded as a book of wisdom. But what kind of wisdom is it? With what biblical parallels can it be connected? Given that it is practical, with what matters does it register concern? Does it speak directly to all mankind or is it specifically directed to the believer? Are the issues that presented themselves to the 1st century church pertinent for this century? It is the intention of this article to speak to the foregoing questions.

It has always been difficult to trace the outline as found in this epistle. While it is not the purpose of this article to trace the argument of James as it develops, one cannot ignore the importance of developing arguments within the epistle. The wise man desires bases on which he can affirm his spiritual vitality. The book of James presents the tests of faith. As the believer encounters opportunities to walk in wisdom, and employs the provisions given by the Lord, genuine growing faith will be evident. Faith always is appropriated in concrete circumstances applied to specific attitudes and acts.

The Wisdom Tradition in the Ancient World

Collections of wise sayings were found in every part of the OT and NT biblical worlds.¹ In its subject matter, the sayings of the wise embraced one's practical, everyday conduct and gave advice about proper behavior in the royal courts. Its message was ostensibly simple:

¹ R. B. Y. Scott, *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1971) 23f.

whoever takes this counsel is "wise," whoever ignores wisdom's warning is a "fool." The OT expects the father of the family to teach his children these words, e.g., "my son" Prov 1:8-9:18; 22:17-24:22. Most of the proverbs of ancient literatures, including the OT, are short statements which pertain to the varied facets of life. These are sayings which describe the successful life--which can be learned through the pursuit of wisdom.

Wisdom in the OT

The object of OT wisdom is twofold:

1. To instruct the student to explore life's meaning through reflection, inquiry, and debate.
2. To guide the learner in living, through the rules of God's moral order.

The Wisdom literature of the OT is usually a reference to the books of Ecclesiastes, Job, certain Psalms (19; 27; 104; 107; 147; 148), and especially the book of Proverbs. Also, there are books of Hebrew literature outside the OT canon which are cast in this literary mold.

Wisdom in the NT

Of the books of the NT, James is often identified as an example of wisdom literature.² There is no question that this epistle, as other portions of the NT (e.g., 1 Cor 1-4 and the Sermon on the Mount), are of the essence of divine wisdom. It is another matter to identify the epistle of James as wisdom literature, since this is a literary classification.

II. The Wisdom Tradition and James

There are a number of differences between the characteristics of Wisdom literature and James that disqualify it as Wisdom literature, though, of course, this epistle presents the wisdom of God. The following observations should be considered:

1. James does not exhibit the paternal tone (e.g., "my son") found often in Wisdom literature. In fact, there is no emphasis on any age group.
2. There is an absence of rhetorical questions in James' argument and in his introduction (cf. Prov 1:22).
3. There is a congratulatory and often exclamatory form of speech employed in Wisdom literature, as in Prov 3:13 and 28:19. This form is

² Donald W. Burdick, "James" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, (12 vols; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 12.164.

also found in the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount, but it is a form never found in James.

4. The four key words of Prov 1:6, showing the various literary forms employed in Proverbs, are: proverbs (Hebrew *masal*), parables (*melisa*), wise words and riddles, verbal puzzles (*hida*).

The most important of these forms is the *masal*, “likeness, comparison.” It is often expressed in verse couplets. Other *masal* expressions emphasize contrast, antithesis³ (Prov 10:1; 25:1; 26:11). James does not employ such literary devices as these models or paradigms.

5. The message of James is not formed around the figures of the wise and the simple, a frequent device to teach truth in the wisdom literature (Prov 10:1).

Also, varieties of poetic parallelism, including numerical parallelism, commonly used in stating the sentiments of OT wisdom, do not appear in James.

What does the absence in James of structures, forms and vocabulary common to OT wisdom literature indicate? It means that James is not fashioned after, nor dependent on, an OT model.⁴ There is no adequate reason why the NT should include literature cast in the same form as Proverbs, Job or Ecclesiastes. The epistle of James gains no advantage in imitating the wisdom formulas. If the author wished to cast his epistle after the wisdom model, he would have made use of its peculiar literary features.

Literary Parallels in James

The Old Testament. Of course James, like the rest of the NT, breathes the wisdom of God, but its literary characteristics are indicative of NT forms of expression, even though the writer of this epistle has been steeped in OT and Incarnational thought.

James was familiar with the Hebrew OT as well as the LXX. His vocabulary of 570 words includes 73 of which are not used in the rest of the NT--and 46 of that number are found in the LXX. Certain idiomatic Hebraisms are frequent.⁵ It should be noted that OT personages are employed as illustrations.

The book of James cannot be explained as a reapplication of the OT message. The Epistle's author reflects the teaching of Jesus Christ too broadly to allow that conclusion.

³ Samuel P. Tregelles, *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) 517.

⁴ James Hardy Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1971) 18-19.

⁵ James Adamson, *The Epistle of James* (NIC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 18.

The New Testament. It is clear that James preserves directly the truth (some call it tradition, possibly a neutral term) of Jesus. This is the immediate background of the wisdom of James, rather than the OT. But this Epistle does not rest on the four Gospels, nor on the full range of the Synoptics--it reflects the specific teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and a few other *loci*.⁶

It seems better, then, to refer to James as NT wisdom, or the wisdom of Jesus. It is well to remember that Jesus heightened the ethical demands (Matt 5-7; Luke 6) for his disciples far above the nature and scope of application of the OT. Like Jesus, James expects his teaching to produce an altered, new life. In fact, James' wisdom specifies how the believer lives to please God. In the light of the Father's constant presence and in view of His coming at the *eschaton* (the consummation, the Judge of the ages), the believer must not merely think but must live in a way which honors God.

III. *Wisdom in James' Epistle*

The effective means by which a believer becomes practically wise is prayer (1:5). If God is seen as the source of all provision, then the superintendence by His will offsets the human desire to prosper apart from God's wise provision.

The Way of Wisdom

James builds on the background of Jesus' teaching about prayer (Matt 18:18-20; 21:22 // Mark 11:24; John 14:13-14; 15:7 and 16:23). These are promises based on the believer's relationship to God. Because of this personal dimension, the prayer of faith is effective in securing both daily wisdom (1:5) and in the cure of the repentant, ailing sinner (5:15). Such an extreme measure in that believer's life calls forth the demonstration of wisdom in a changed life, a living statement of faith in the wisdom of God.

The well-debated passage 2:18-26, especially v 20, is written to the brethren (2:15) with the idea of the fulfilled Christian life in mind. The vain man is one in whom there is no recognizable fulfillment of the divine purpose (1:4; 3:2). God's intention includes both the forensic righteousness conferred on the believer by God and the practical demonstration of applied righteousness by the wise believer.⁷ Paul, too, stresses both elements: being a child and living like a child of God.

⁶ Peter W. Davids, "James and Jesus" in *Gospel Perspectives*, Vol. 5 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984) 66-67.

⁷ Leslie Mitton, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966) 103.

Practical righteousness is the wise life; it is characterized by freedom from one's limitations and is a life dependent on God, who is the author of all good (1:17).

The subjects which concern the wise believer are: the source of wisdom, regeneration, the nature and use of God's Word, the control of one's response to others (especially favoritism), the response of righteous faith, the error of grasping at life apart from the will of God, and the confession of sin.

James presents the two ways of life available to the believer: there are two ways to deal with trials and temptations, to respond to God's Word, to relate to wealth, to approach faith, and to use the tongue. There is a choice between "wisdoms," and between the two ways to cope with one's desires. Also, there are alternatives to the tendency to judge, to be arrogant, and to be self-centered. Finally, James reminds us of the alternatives to impatience, deception, and to the bondages of prayerlessness.

These two ways of life are not simply presentations of an inferior and a superior lifestyle. The wisdom of the individual materializes: should he or she choose the prayer path? Spiritual gain or loss will result. However, what James presents is not an option for the believer--it is obligatory. The necessity of a Christian lifestyle is indicated by the frequency of James' injunctions; there are fifty-four imperatives in one hundred eight verses. James reproves, rebukes and exhorts through the use of the prohibitive subjunctive.⁸

The commands address the thoughts, emotions and the activity of the will. Some of these commands emphasize one's attitude, while others specify individual acts. At times, the nature of the word-meaning demands a complex idea of the attitude with acts growing therefrom. Of course, in dealing with the Christian personality, the total personality of body, soul and spirit, are included in any response to God's Word. At times there are distinct emphases which involve one aspect of the personality more than the others.

The Attitude of the Wise Christian

The word (1:2) for testing is *πειρασμός*;⁹ some have taken this word to mean only or principally "persecution." However, that position ignores an entire range of human experiences which require wisdom. Secondly, it would require an unnecessarily late date for James, one which would allow for later developments of persecution

⁸ H. E. Dana and J. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1955) 171.

⁹ H. Seesemann, "πειρα" *TDNT* 6 (1968) 23-26.

beyond the local (less intensive) level. Thirdly, this word is used of common circumstances of misfortune (*πειρασμός*) in Plutarch's work.¹⁰ The term then covers a range of experiences from internal, moral pressure to exterior circumstances and, whenever indicated contextually, to persecution. This first of James' tests of faith concerns faith under pressure (chap 1).

What should be the wise believer's attitude in response to disappointments, sorrows, hardships, persecutions, and temptations? James (1:2) says the response should be joy--not just joy at the end of the experience but throughout it all (indicated by the present participle "knowing"). The verb describing the expressed response is an aorist tense, indicating that on each occasion of danger to the soul the trial should be counted joy. Counting it joy is prescribed, not suggested.¹¹ "Counting" is a bookkeeping term; it emphasizes what one must conclude, perhaps regardless of what one observes. These conscious acts are possible--because there is happiness in experiencing whatever contributes to the Christian's spiritual growth. This understanding of happiness is traceable to Jesus' Beatitudes where the blessed man (cf. Ps 1) rejoices under unusual circumstances. The Christian attitude expresses itself in decisive, conscious acts, rejoicing in the opportunity they provide for the Lord to work His blessing in their growth: "that they might be complete" (*ἵνα ᾗτε τέλειοι*).

Wisdom and Testing

In the midst of this opportunity for growth, there are two areas of danger. The first area of danger (1:2) is that the testing will suddenly and frequently (*ὅταν*) overtake us. The word "fall" (*περιπέσητε*) in classical Greek designates an unplanned and undesirable event;¹² in 2 Macc 10:4, it describes Israel's unforeseen affliction by heathen nations. The only other NT use of the word "fall" describes the ambush of the man who "fell" among thieves on the Jerusalem-Jericho road (Luke 10:30). The strength of a testing often is that we never know when it will occur.

The predicament caused by testing points out that wisdom will be necessary. The verb "to ask" occurs twice in 1:5-6 (both present imperatives); seeking wisdom from the giving-God is the normal procedure.

The second danger (1:4) is that the believer will seek God's wisdom, but will stop seeking and applying God's wisdom before it has

¹⁰ LSJ 1221.

¹¹ Joseph B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James* (Grand Rapids:Zondervan, 1954) 33.

¹² LSJ 1249.

fully accomplished its purposes, a perfect work (ἔργον τέλειον). The command is to "keep on letting patience achieve" God's intention (ἐχέτω). Wisdom is given to teach us proper attitudes. It is possible that we will not allow the full extent of God's purposes. This failure of faith may cause us to (1) lie our way out of further distresses, (2) simply give up under pressure, and (3) to yield to self-pity, bitterness and discontent, rather than to patience.

It is God's wisdom to insist on faith, suggested by the present tense of the imperative: "let him continue to ask in faith" (1:6). It refers to a simple act of coming to Jesus with a specific need in mind, knowing that a partnership has been formed through confidence in Him. When one is characterized by wavering (1:6), there is no such confidence that the prayer will be heeded, that one cannot decide whether to trust God or not. A sea rages within him but without resolution; there is only unsettled behavior. Continual hesitation does not promote fellowship with God. This is contrary to wisdom.

Wisdom as Skill

There is necessary activity and persistence in the exercise of wisdom. In Matt 26:39 and Luke 22:42, Jesus prays unwaveringly for wisdom, "not my will. . . ." Note Peter's hesitation and its consequences (Matt 14:25-31). The wise are only so when they *act* wisely. James instructs us to learn attitudes as a part of wisdom.

The word "wisdom" is used only twice in James (1:5 and 3:13-18), but the concept is developed throughout the book. Wisdom in the secular sense was used to designate one's skill in an art or handicraft; it had reference to the most exact sciences. It was also employed in a religious sense of the Divine essence of pure and immutable being. In that application, wisdom indicated the most envied and elevated existence. The idea of wisdom occurs extensively in the LXX. The verb, noun and adjective complex occurs over 300 times, most often in the wisdom books, but quite frequently in the historical books.¹³ There it specifies technical skill and knowledge as, for example, in describing the ability of the Tabernacle's craftsmen, such as Oholiab and Bezalel. The prominent ideas specified are those of experience in life, with its problems, and of success in living. Emphasis is heavily on the side of activity rather than thought. Wisdom is revealed by practice and in personal piety.

Though wisdom describes innate skill, clever conduct, and a knowledge of culture, the OT speaks often of the wisdom possessed by

¹³ Edwin Hatch and Henry A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint* (3 vols; Rapids: Baker, 1983) 2. 1278-81.

God and the wise response expected in His creatures as they honor His Word.

Wisdom and Obedience

In the NT, the wisdom in which Jesus grew continually was also obedience to the revealed Word of God (Luke 2:40).¹⁴ His understanding and use of God's wise revelation caused his enemies to marvel (Mark 6:2). Stephen manifests God's wisdom in his witness. Paul expounds the theology of wisdom, especially as it relates to Christian growth. The wisdom of the Lamb in the Revelation of John specifies his ability to interpret the mysteries of the last times.

James' epistle emphasizes wisdom in living out the life of Christ in ordinary human circumstances. It is the wisdom that comes from God; it is opposed to the wisdom of this world; it does not serve those who champion the other, immoral "wisdom."

The wisdom of which James speaks does not derive from human experience; it is not selfish. It signifies a spiritual understanding of God's will for man's life and a welcome compliance in the whole of one's life.

What effect does wisdom have on one's attitudes and ensuing actions? James warns against faulty judgments of boasting and self-deception. There are six imperatives in Jas 1:9-22, all but one of them in the present tense; the exception is δέξασθε in 1:21. This passage shows examples of how to cope with temptations to double-mindedness.

In 1:9-11, the example of failure to trust God (double-mindedness) concerns material wealth and its accompanying prestige.¹⁵ James, throughout this epistle, as here, presents the tests of faith, the evidences by which we can be assured that our faith is actively single-minded, the opposite of διακρινόμενος.

In 1:9, the second of four uses of the conjunction δέ appears; each one indicates a new development in the argument in this section of the book (1:5, 9, 19 and 22).

Wisdom and Wealth

Rather than telling fellow Christians that it is permissible to assume a low profile, though they are socially insignificant, he commands each one to "glory" or "boast" (a word used most often in Paul's epistles in a pejorative sense). God is to be glorified, of course, not

¹⁴ U. Wilckens, "Σωφία" *TDNT* 7 (1971) 496-528.

¹⁵ Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter and Jude* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1964) 15.

because of one's poverty in contrast to the affluence and influence of others, but because God's plan for such ones is the equality to be found in Christ. His acceptance in the Son is intended to sustain him amid testing. Without this support, he may be tempted to seek a solution in opting for a security similar to the influential man who depends on wealth and influence to extricate him from potential troubles. Lest the "rich" man seek to settle his problems apart from the Lord's wisdom, James (1:10) reminds him to exult in the position he shares with his less able brother. Both rich and poor have access and are equally dependent on the provision of God. Matt 5:12 has a similar command to the spiritually alert to exult, knowing that the wages for life's experience are not payable on earth. In James, one runs the risk of a failure to trust God, either through practiced intrigue or despondency which may even lead him to think God has forsaken him (1:13). The physical dimensions of life are transitory--this realization is a mark of wisdom (1:11; see also 5:1-6). The error (1:16) against which James warns seems best related to the foregoing section where a careless believer allows faithlessness to grow to fruition. Vv 13-15 contain several negative notes, while those of vv 17-18 are positive. The command is properly rendered "Stop being deceived" (1:16).¹⁶ Deception is a token of the unused provision of wisdom.

Wisdom and Rank

The wise instructor commands (1:19) the demonstration of God's mind in the believer's conduct. The gifts of God and the birth by God are sufficient to produce a life reflecting a relationship with God. The wise Christian has a distinctive purpose (note the parallel constructions of εἰς τὸ to with the infinitive) in living.¹⁷ The last construction with εἰς is changed from an infinitive to a noun (ὄργη) to introduce emphatically the subject of the next section (1:20-27) with its warning against wrath in speech and conduct (1:26). Reception of the Word of God results in the traits of a Rabbi's good pupil as one who is " . . . quick to hear, slow to forget. . . ."¹⁸ However, James upgrades the word "forget" to "speak," which in this context is the hesitation to speak rashly or in anger. He also adds a warning against acts of wrath which are the result of self-assertion as over against God's will.

¹⁶ Peter W. Davids, *Commentary on James* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 86.

¹⁷ Arthur Carr, *The General Epistle of James* (CGT; Cambridge: Clarendon, 1899) 22.

¹⁸ APOT 707.

Wisdom and Growth

The counsel of God's wisdom aims at implanting His word into the Christian's character (ἑμψυτον) in 1:21.¹⁹ The "rooted word"--that is its nature--is welcomed (δέξασθε) into a life, like elements of nutrition being continually absorbed into a plant to make it grow.

The element which makes this growth-pattern possible is "meekness" (1:21). Jesus calls himself "meek" in Matt 11:29; He places "meekness" in the forefront of the qualities of the "blest" (Matt 5:4, 5). It is willingness to acknowledge the will of God in one's life, the opposite of the exercise of anger (3:13, 17), and is an expression of righteousness (1:20).²⁰ The potency of the "rooting-word" results in the character of Christ transforming (σώζω) the entire life of the Christian (ψύχη). The intended goal for the believer is not learning; it is deeds (1:22).

Just as spiritually unproductive as double-mindedness is the attempt to combine faithfulness to Christ, in other connections, with unfaithfulness in relations with other Christians. The second test of faith relates to the deceptively gentle pressure of favoritism (chap 2). Believers are admonished to stop trying (ἔχετε) to combine faith in Christ with the discrimination of persons (2:1). This snobishness ignores injustice for fear of the powerful (2:6). Such conduct respects the person of man, but disrespects the person of God. These perpetrators are judges with evil thoughts (2:4).

In one of three OT quotations in James (2:8-11), there is evidence of Semitic grammatical influence: the future is used as a categorical imperative, "love your neighbor."²¹ The form emphasizes the exercise of the will; it is a command. The emphasis on a controlled use of the will is seen in these imperative verbs of "saying" and "doing" (2:12). A third test focuses on personal commitment (2:14-26). The believer "enwisened," recognizes the unity of the Law which reflects the unity of the Law-giver's will. Believers are to be influenced by God's wisdom so that they won't express their impatience with those in need (2:16). The language here was used to let one know he was being dismissed. The next word in the imperative (ὑπάγω) was used to say goodbye to beggars. It signaled that contact with the needy-one was over; the subject was closed. Wisdom should control the emotions. Wishing the

¹⁹ Sophie Laws, *The Epistle of James* (HNTC; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) 82.

²⁰ BAGD 704.

²¹ W. E. Oesterley, "The General Epistle of James" *The Expositor's Greek New Testament* (5 vols; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1976) 5.291.

one who needs warm clothing and sufficient food to have them indicates only a hearer not a doer of the Word. The word "comforted" (χορτάζεσθε) means, "to feed someone until they are full" (2:16).²² It is no more excusable to ignore God's revealed will in respect to treatment of people's needs ("loving one's neighbor") than it is to reject God's admonitions not to murder and to avoid adultery (2:11).

The emphasis of the verb "to have" (2:18) shows what potentially belongs to one. The chiasmic structure of these verses (2:18-26) means to tie faith to works inseparably. Without faith, there would be no reason to do any works. Also, without faith, there would be no relation to the dynamic power necessary to perform the works. It is also necessary to recall the sort of works expected in this passage: "saying" and "doing" what the principle of love demands. The point is not just to do what man will see, but what God expects the result of their faith to be also (2:20). Personal commitment to God moves beyond empty claims (2:18) either to man or to God. The vain man is one who does not employ wisdom (2:20). It is interesting that Abraham's hospitality (Gen 18) is passed over as an illustration of faith in favor of his offering of Isaac. He was justified previously, believing God would give a son. The point is, Abraham's relationship to God is of greatest import, even above acts of mercy. Isaac's "offering" is not an act of Abraham's mercy, but is an act of faith, completed faith, not like that of the unwise.

The Tests of Faith

In chaps 1 and 2, three tests have been presented whereby the believer can determine whether he or she is walking in wisdom. These are tests concerning faith. Only faith leads us to walk wisely.

1. When people are under pressure (chap 1), the wise walk of the faithful brings them to trust God's perspective on life. They must trust God to provide for them. Jesus instructed men (Matt 6:24-34) that God was dependable for today and tomorrow; the pursuit of God and His righteousness should be our preoccupation (Matt 6:33) as doers of the Word.

2. There are pressures of another kind--friendly pressures. There is no place in the Christian assembly for the veneration of personalities, nor for the denegration of those we judge to be of lesser importance (2:1-13). Favoritism not only ignores the nature of the Body of Christ, but leads one to worship persons instead of the Person of God. The error is an attempt to combine one's faith in a general sense with an

²² G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: & T. Clark, 1937) 482.

exception to what Christ taught. If the church service is to honor Christ, what difference does it make who occupies "places of honor" (2:3)? Six times in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus makes reference to Lev 19:18, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (see also Rom 13:19; Gal 5:14).

3. In the last part of chap 2 (vv 14-26), there is the wise admonition to let faith result in faithful acts. This section is directly related to the previous one: it is the poor who benefit from the acts "out of" faith. Jesus taught (John 13:14-15) the disciples such practical dimensions of love (John 15:12, 17).

The wisdom of faith in 3:1-5:20 demonstrates the possibilities of the Christian life. Here there are six tests of wisdom's self-control. One's faith may be tested for its vitality at three points. Do I exercise self-control or does my orientation lie in worldly-wisdom and its misuse of the tongue (3:1-18)? What is my reaction to the lure of the world and its attraction (4:1-5:12)? and, Do I distinguish my faith through its acts of prayer and restoration (5:13-20)? In the light of the return of the Lord, the Judge, the believer must walk in wisdom (5:7f).

Chap 3 opens with a present imperative (3:1), "Don't keep on attempting to become teachers." The teaching office, viewed as a counterpart to being a Rabbi, was strongly sought.²³ Any social contact one might have with a Rabbi was desirable: whether to speak with him, have him as a house-guest, to marry his daughter--even to carry his burdens, fetch him water, or saddle his donkey. There was acceptance, authority and a highly desirable lifestyle in the role of the Christian teacher too.

From God's perspective, the teacher's role is important because of the vast influence of his words. The teacher is a minister of wisdom; his words can lead to life changes, therefore, the censure or approval will be keener (3:1). The word "judgment" signifies both the possibility of either acquittal or condemnation. James links himself with other teachers by using the first person plural. The future indicative emphasizes an inescapable time of evaluation.

Jesus speaks of teachers who are desensitized about their responsibility: they only concern themselves with personal honors, they ignore righteousness in favor of oppression, feigned spirituality, blind guidance, and pretense (Matt 23).

Wisdom and Ministry

The wise use of the tongue is illustrated in six ways in chap 3, each one illustrates the need of control; the list is punctuated by

²³ APOT 707.

statements and questions which heighten the need for the exercise of wisdom. True and false wisdom are contrasted as to origin, character, and outcome. A man's words are an extension of himself; they reflect his nature (cf. 3:10). Control over the tongue signifies the whole person is under control (τέλειος) (3:2). In chaps 3 and 4, the thought introduced in 1:5-8 is further developed.

The aorist imperative δειξάτω (3:13) calls upon the wise to "demonstrate" his wisdom. Even a wise one must make an effort to reveal God's provided sagacity. Perhaps there were some there who imagined that teaching yields maturity automatically and who did not realize that they were ignorant of the temptations of the office (2:9). The evidence of maturity is only detected when the wise man acts wisely and in meekness. The emphasis is, once again, on deeds versus words.

In 3:13 there occurs a *hapax legomenon*. The word Ἐπιστήμων ("endued with knowledge") is employed in classical Greek of a skilled workman, as a scientific person, as opposed to someone who is without special "knowledge or training."²⁴ It is employed to describe judges (Deut 1:13) and the nation Israel (Deut 4:6).

Jesus said every insignificant word would be judged (Matt 12:36). Words cannot be used for the benefit of the individual, they must be effectual for good. The frequency with which the teacher exercises his frequently is envisioned in the word πολλά: "all sorts of times" and frequently (3:2). Thus, the need is to be careful; because the unruly teacher can unwisely engage in destructive conduct, can be duplicitous, and be selfishly ambitious (3:5-14).

The wisdom which dominates that kind of conduct comes from a source other than God (cf. 1:5, 17). The three words describing this alternate wisdom present a descending level of characteristics (3:15). Jesus said the results produced by the conduct of a professed wise person indicate the source and nature of that wisdom (3:17; Matt 11:19). He also related that the proper use of the teacher's gift results in blessing (3:9; Matt 5:19). James warns would-be teachers to stop using the teaching function as a permit for arrogant boasting and even for lying, especially in the sense that such wisdom is claimed to be derived from God (3:14), when it simply cannot be.

Wisdom and the World

There is another way to determine the reality of one's faith. How does the believing wise one deal with the magnetism of the godless system of life known as the world (4:1-5:12)?

²⁴ LSJ 573.

The first command to wise living is at 4:7, but the background begins at v 1. Possibly our Lord's words in Matt 7:7-12 provided the basis for this divine commentary on the wise and the unwise ways of dealing with ambition (4:1-6).

In vv 5 and 6, James reminds the readers that there is a will to be served other than their own. To reject Jesus' Lordship is to express unfaithfulness to our God. Jesus spoke of an adulterous generation which sought only to please itself, even when confronted by God's revelation (Matt 12:38-39). Duplicity of heart, seen in adultery (4:4), is really not divided affections, but a reassignment of total affections, according to Jesus (Matt 6:24-34). In the Matthean reference, as in James chap 4, the issue that reveals spiritual infidelity is one's grasping attitude toward material things.

The remedy for this display of worldly wisdom is submission and resistance (4:7). God has every right to our love. The Word of God means all that it says (Deut 32:47—note *κενὸς* answering to Deuteronomy's *κενὸς*) when it asserts God's jealousy (4:5).

Maintaining Fellowship

Because of God's just claims for our affection (*οἶνον*), James issues a series of commands in 4:7-10, all ten are aorist imperatives, emphasizing the need for acts of the will.

1. "Submit" (*ὑποτάσσομαι*) 4:7. The aorist imperative denotes an urgent entreaty or command. The passive aorist has the significance of the middle voice.²⁵ This structure of the word suggests voluntary alignment under God's authority. James expects total commitment, expressed by subordination and resistance initially, then subsequently, in obedience to the other imperatives. In Luke 2:51, this verb "submit" describes the voluntary subordination of Jesus to his parents. It also indicates the same deference of the Christian wife to her husband (Eph 5:21ff.). NT usage provides a family structure for one dimension of usage of this term. Perhaps the basis of this command in 4:7 is founded on the practice of one's relation to God's family. Elsewhere in the NT *ὑποτάσσω* is employed in the sense of involuntary compulsion (e.g., Rom 8:20).

2. "Resist" (*ἀντίστητε*). This aorist imperative is best taken as ingressive. It is often translated as an urgent entreaty, "Take your stand against. . . ." When an imperative is followed by a future verb form, as here, it forms the equivalent of a semitic conditional sentence.²⁶ This modifies the construction and is best translated, "When you take your

²⁵ Adamson, *James* 174.

²⁶ Mayor, *James* 146.

stand against the Devil, he *will* run from you." Spiritual advantage in combat with the Devil is not automatic, the believer must take a position; this is a positive action, a step of volition beyond non-submission to the tempter (1:13-15).

In His wisdom, God provides a way beyond escape--resistance against the adversary. This is accomplished by submission to the will and life of God. Jesus said no man can serve two masters simultaneously, he can love and serve only one of them at a time. In temptations, Jesus sought this refuge by appropriating the Word of God at each occasion. The result of His resistance (Matt 4:10) was Satan's flight (Matt 4:11). Christ is the model. Note, too, the episode of spiritual strife in Peter's life (Luke 22:21-36), and the anticipated turnabout of Peter in taking a stand against the Devil through submission to God (Luke 22:32).

3. "Draw near" (ἐγγίσατε) 4:8. God is not only to be obeyed, but He must be worshipped. In the OT (Exod 19:22; 30:20; Lev 10:3) the word is used of the Hebrew priest approaching God in both Tabernacle and Temple. The essential idea is to come as close to God as one can. The construction is parallel to the previous conditional statement (4:7). Here it is rendered, "When you draw near to God, He will draw near to you."

4. "Cleanse" (καθαρίσατε) 4:8. The word draw near was also used of the pious turning to God (Jer 30:20). This approach required the worshipper to cleanse himself before attempting to worship God. Matt 23:26 records Jesus' teaching that any ritual will only hold value if the worship is morally clean. Jesus adds to the teaching about cleansing in John 13. There the emphasis is on both the believer's responsibility to appropriate and the Savior's part in providing cleansing.

As the priests entered the Tabernacle, they paused in the court to wash their hands and feet in order to be acceptable to God and avoid judgment (Exod 30:19-21). Jesus' teaching about the large and small obstructions in the eye (Matt 7:3ff.) concern cleansing as a prerequisite to any effective moral correction. The statement about "hands" and "hearts" symbolizes "deeds" and "thoughts." The word "sinners" specifies the believer who has "missed the mark"; this failure must be cleansed before genuine worship can be enjoyed (4:8).

The two aorist imperatives are "cleanse," which emphasizes the purging of our deeds, and "purify." The noun, καθαρός, is used of the body without the smearing of paint or oil by Xenophon.²⁷ He also employs it of wheat stripped of its chaff²⁸ and of an army stripped of all

²⁷ Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, X.7.

²⁸ Ibid XVII. 8 9.

but its very best warriors.²⁹ The central idea in every case is that the subject is free from anything that would diminish its full value.

'Αγνίσατε translated "purify," on the other hand, is used of moral purity accomplished by acts of a dedicated will. It places one in a condition, prepared for worship (see also ἀγνίζω, 1 Pet 1:22 and 1 John 3:3). 'Αγνός is used of cleansing from ceremonial defilement in the LXX and in John 11:55 and Acts 21:24, 26; 24:18.

The Levitical priest had to be cleansed before he served God. At the same time, the heart had to be purified, that is, separated from everything that might cause uncleanness, (especially see 1:6ff.). In Luke 11:39-42, Jesus distinguishes between apparent, outward holiness and the separation which always can be detected by the One who looks on the heart (also Jas 5:2). When the believer rests in the wisdom of God, both that which gives rise to the sin (1:14) and the enactment of subsequent evil deeds are to be dealt with. Jesus' wise instruction must be applied to the spiritual condition. The word "heart" depicts the seat of the emotions and of thought, even of one's desires and understanding, and especially of all these elements of personality crystalizing in the action of the will, the root of one's conduct. The word "sinners" (ἁμαρτολοί) identifies those who sin in full view of everyone, in a notorious fashion (4:8). In parallel with the idea of the cleansing of the heart, the sort of sin to be dealt with is failure, the believer's failure to trust God and His will for the Christian's life. This is sin which God alone can detect, but, once specified by the Spirit's conviction, the believer is the only one who can turn alternatively to God in faith.

The Renewal of Fellowship

The next five aorist imperatives describe the characteristic acts of the process of repentance--as our Lord sees it. Again, it should be noted that these are not options, they are steps in one's change which God commands (4:9-10). Once again, the Beatitudes of Jesus are the background to James' words (Matt 5:4 and Luke 6:25). The "mourning" in Matt 5, as in James, is not over sin generally expressed in the world, but sin as discovered in the individual who then repents and is subsequently comforted (παρακληθήσονται). Only then is the believer "blessed."

The first of these commands is ταλαιπωρήσατε; the noun form indicates misery and distress (4:9).³⁰ Repentance begins within. Jesus commanded His disciples to take up their cross and deny themselves. The believer who admits to having sinned is "crushed" in his spiritual

²⁹ Ibid VIII.117.

³⁰ BAGD 810.

consciousness. This word is used of undergoing hardship (Jer 4:13, 20; Isa 33:1). Here James emphasizes the personal initiative, "'Be distressed."

They must "mourn" and "weep" also. "Mourn" (πενθήσατε) expresses a self-contained grief, not normally visible. This godly sorrow is commended by Jesus in Luke 6:25 and Mark 16:10. It indicates a grief that leaves a heartache. In the two verses cited, this "mourning" is coupled with "weeping" (κλαύσατε). The internal grief brings tears to the eyes; inner feeling is communicated. This weeping is a loud expression of pain or sorrow; it is even used of a lament for those who have died (John 11:31; Matt 2:18).

But repentance transcends feeling, no matter how deeply seated, and it goes past a display of this grief. It also demands change. The verb μετατραπήτω ("to turn about, turn into") emphasizes change by one's turning.³¹ This is the only use of this word in the NT (4:9).

The end result of the believer's repentance is the Lord's renewal to unrestricted fellowship (4:10). What has the repentant believer lost in the process of renewal--nothing. He has taken his proper place; this is suggested first in v 6 (ταπεινοίς) and again in v 10 (ταπεινώθητε). These four verses form a unit. The word ταπεινώ means "'to confess and deplore one's spiritual insignificance." The aorist passive has, here, the significance of the middle voice, "deplore yourself," "count yourself wretched."

The believer who counts the Lord's wisdom as precious counsel is rewarded. The Lord will raise him up (4:10). This parallels Jesus' promise in Matt 23:12 and Luke 23:12 where the contexts have to do with humility; Jesus' parable about a display of pride in prayer (Luke 18:9-14) illustrates the need for humility by the religious.

God's attitude toward the humility of repentance is to exalt the humble. The raising from humility here is not an elevation in the social scheme of things, but a drawing up into an acceptance in the spiritual realm--unhindered fellowship. This is a command with a promise.

James returns to the practical question of unity within the Body of Christ in 4:11. Καταλαλείτε, the present imperative, instructs God's people to "'stop defaming, talking against" one's fellow Christians; the practice had been in progress among them. Perhaps this is one of the things that the previous catena of aorist imperatives directed the repentant believer to care for. Even if the criticism against another Christian is true, caustic activity can only hurt the Body; it also obligates the critic for criticism by the same standards of conduct. Jesus' wise counsel stipulates this in Matt 7:1ff. and Luke 6:37. Talking

³¹ Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon* 288.

against the brother or sister disregards the purpose of the "kingly law," that is, to be a "guide for people who wish to please God. Speaking hard words about one another is encouraged by pride which is evil (4:16) and which leads to conflict among believers (4:1-2). The Lawgiver alone has the right to discriminate (4:12). We do not have the advantage necessary to be able to save or to destroy, so we do not have the right of pronouncement.

Man's dependent nature should keep him from acting independently of God. God's will, and not personal judgment, should provide a basis for human decision and as a guide about how to plan and execute one's life (4:15; Luke 12:28; 13:32-33). These were well-to-do believers whose whole life consisted in traveling for trade and profit. God filled no essential category in their lives (4:16).

The words ἄγε νῦν (4:13) are equivalent to "come now" or "see here" (cf. Matt 26:65). This too is the counsel of wisdom. The intention of this command is to reprove those already guilty of making plans which exclude God. A calculated arrogance in which they will do what they like, where they like (τῆν πόλιν means "this city") and for as long as they wish. Even if there would be no arrogance in evidence, God is still left out. Note how the use of καὶ separates the various elements of the intended plan in v 11. The wisdom of Jesus in Matt 6:34 provided a background for these words. The common idea is preoccupation with oneself. The Matthean verbs μεριμνήσητε and μεριμνήσει concern the matter of a person's trust in God (6:19-34). The verb μεριμνάω means "to care," "to be anxious," and in 6:19-34 the idea is "worry," "self-concern for security." The use of the future tense in Jas 4:13 indicates that specific plans are made (will go, will make, will buy, will sell) with no intention of change.

Wealth is not the highest value. Patience is the alternative to grasping (5:1-6). Jas 5:1 repeats the command for attention, as at 4:13 (ἄγε νῦν) "come now," "see here." Again, the purpose is to reprove. The νῦν intensifies James' insistence, "without delay."³² In addition to the word "weep" already used in 4:9, James employs the word "howl" (ὄλολύζοντες). It indicates the nature of the crying--a howling because of distress.³³ Here, it is the distress borne out of repentance. Though used only here in the NT, the LXX uses it often, at times of violent grief (Joel 1:5, 13).³⁴

The warning here (5:1-6) is addressed to believers to dissuade them from setting a high value on wealth. Had the idea been to address the

³² Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book Co., 1889) 430.

³³ BAGD 567.

³⁴ Thayer, *Lexicon* 567.

unsaved, James would have presented an appeal to be saved. In addition, the coming of Christ is cited as a benefit in 5:7; this would not be a comfort to the unbeliever. The wise (Matt 6:19; Luke 12:33) are those who do not make riches their treasures (5:2).

In the second part of this chapter (5:7-12), the alternative to the grasping of materialism is stated: patience. The imperative **μακροθυμήσατε** is found here and in v 8. This word describes an attitude which can endure delay, bear suffering and still never gives in. It is an aspect of the Holy Spirit's life expression (Gal 5:22). The same word is used of God's being content to wait in his longsuffering toward men. The illustration in 5:7 bears out this thought; it also uses the present imperative "behold." The background of the expectant farmer who orders his life along lines of patience forms the chief character (also in Matt 13:30). The preciousness of the fruit justifies the waiting until the heavenly gifts are received.

The imperative, "stabilize, strengthen!" (5:8), in tandem with the second use of **μακροθυμήσατε** specifies that the believer's stance is not just to await the inevitable restitution, but to nourish the activity of the resolution. We must will to wait for God's time to enrich us according His will; he has promised to care for us until He rewards us (5:8). This is a cure for "double-soulness." The employment of the word in the LXX most often describes strengthening the body with food, though it specifies God's working in men's spiritual quotient (cf. 1 Pet 3:17).³⁵ God's reward is not a compounded interest on all the valued things we have done without; it is life on a different plane (John 14:6) and in the presence (**ἡ παρουσία**) of Him whose coming is imminent (**πρὸ τῶν θυρῶν ἔστηκεν**, 5:9). Because His presence will be our reward, we are encouraged against continuing to blame one another for unmerited distress. **Μὴ στενάζετε** means, "Stop complaining!" (Perhaps inwardly, since the word denotes a feeling which is internal and unexpressed, an inward feeling of a grudge against another.)

Jesus' word of wisdom to the persecuted is first found in Matt 5:10-12. James calls our attention (**ἰδοῦ**) to those who proved themselves constant: Job and the prophets. They refused to renounce God; their temper did not easily succumb to suffering. In Job, **ὑπομονή** is used 14 times.

The final reaction of the "enwisened" believer occurs in 5:12. Even more important than the avoidance of a grudging attitude, which may lead to the misuse of the tongue, there is a danger in using oaths. This oath is a reference to private assertions. There is no idea of taking a public oath in a courtroom. It is the believer's duty to be constantly

³⁵ Hatch and Redpath, *Concordance* 2.893.

truthful. The use of oaths, half-serious, half-profane, was common in 1st century conversation. James says "stop swearing." Swearing is only necessary where truth is of little importance. Jesus warned against swearing (Matt 5:34-37). Of all the sins involving speech, this is the most serious; it denies the transcendence of God. Swearing places God in obligation to the oath employed. There are OT passages which seem to approve swearing; these occasions are emphases on one's faith in Jehovah as symbolized by an oath. They are not placing God under obligation.

Because the use of oaths would sooner or later lead to excuses, and then on to false statements, James counsels "Let your `yes' be `yes' and nothing more. . . ." A breach of the Third Commandment is to be avoided.

The Wise Use of Prayer

In Jas 5:13-21, two final acts in faith are counseled by James. Pray in every circumstance of life (5:13-20), and restore those living in spiritual despair (5:21). The section begins with three questions; there are twenty-two altogether in James.

The subject of prayer was first introduced in 1:5. Here (5:13), prayer is the preferred alternative to reacting to circumstances and to distress. The circumstances indicated by *κακοπαθεῖ* are not those of illness, but are matters of misfortune. In such difficulties, "continue praying," James urges. But suppose we enjoy pleasant circumstances? We must not forget God in good times, either. When the bounty of God overflows, a wise Christian praises God—another aspect of prayer; dependence is still acknowledged. The word *ψάλλω* means "to sing or to play on a harp"; it describes praise 56 times in the LXX: "continue singing psalms." This epistle abounds everywhere with man's response to God; a major aspect of wisdom is the response of prayer.

The last in a series of three questions, "Is any among you weak?" occurs in 5:14. This weakness is the third of three possible conditions. The condition suggests a person who realizes that he may be unable to respond continuously to the Lord because of encroaching physical illness. It is not specified that this sickness/weakness is necessarily caused by personal sin, though it may be (1 Cor 11:30-32). The *κἄν* with the subjunctive mood of the verb indicates the possibility of sin as the cause of the weakness. The perfect with the verb "to be" emphasizes the continuous state of sin in which those whose sickness is the result of sin will remain until forgiven (Matt 9:2-7).

When one is unable to complete the season of prayer which would lead to forgiveness, the instruction given is to call for those who assist in the ministry of such occasions. Visiting the sick was a normal function

of the elders in a Jewish community (Matt 25:36) and seems to be more than an act of charity. It was visitation aimed at restoration by way of intercession. This, too, is the way of godly wisdom, in contrast to the pagans' use of charms and incantation which was an aspect of worldly wisdom.

The normal form of the imperative in James (aorist) emphasizes each separate act, when the one in need cannot pray, those who are called make supplications, "Let them pray" (5:14).¹ Clem 5:9 mentions supplications for those sick in soul and body.

The word "anointing" (5:4) is a participle (ἀλείψαντες); as such, it is secondary to the act of supplication. The aorist tense of the participle ordinarily points it out as an activity previous to the main verb form, here previous to the prayer offered. "Let them supplicate having anointed him in the name of the Lord" (5:14b; cf. 3 John 7; Acts 5:41; 9:2; 19:7).

It is the prayer of faith that saves, not the anointing, which may be the unmistakable assurance to the sick one that they have voluntarily identified with his or her need (cf. Mark 6:13). This prayer proceeds from a singleminded, "enwisened" man. Prayer (εὐχή) has the sense of "a vow" in the NT, and is most often used in that sense in the LXX. Perhaps the idea is that a prayer of dedication is made as intercession for the one who lies ill, expressing his stated intention to please God. The prayer is based on Jesus; name. He is the prince of the new aeon; the One to whom obligation belongs.

The result of this prayer of identification and dedication results in the physical revitalization of the person fallen ill. The use of ἐγείρω demonstrates that the salvation (σώσσει) designates physical healing. Raising one up in other senses are inappropriate here (cf. Mark 1:31; Matt 9:5). Should the cause of the illness be through sin, forgiveness shall be extended to that one.

V 16 does not begin a new subject, rather it draws a conclusion deduced from the previous section. The two sections are connected by the word οὖν (therefore), not translated in some English versions. By the imperative "confess," the emphasis continues on the practice of mutual confession and intercessory prayer. It is God's appointed means of physical and spiritual wellbeing in the gathering of believers.

The value of confession lies in its expression of the believer's penitence, which furnishes a ground for others' confession. The word ἐξομολογέω means basically "assuming a position of agreement" about the nature of the specified sin and one's avowed intention that it be brought to an end. The prefix suggests an audible confession to another believer. The tense of this imperative suggests the continuing practice of such confession. The verb "to pray" suggests a continuous readiness

to intercede on behalf of fellow Christians. The word "healing" always refers to physical healing in the NT.

This strong prayer is made to be strong, effective by God's response to it. Since God hears prayer, a Christian with a clear conscience (cf. 4:3) should pray boldly (Prov 15:29) and should intercede as Elijah did as an intercessor (5:17) (cf. Jesus' teaching, reflective of the 1 Kgs 17 reference in Luke 4:25; see also Heb 4:15). The Christian is charged to be fully aware of (γινώσκέτω), and to act on the truth of the great value of bringing the unresponsive Christian to repentance (5:17) as Elijah did his generation through prayer and power. The reduplication of the same idea of prayer (in both the noun and the verb) places a special emphasis on the prophet's singling one item out as a special item of prayer. It is not in the one who prays, but in the prayer that the value lies.

The last imperative in James (5:20) suggests how important it is to be fully aware continuously that the return of a sinning believer from his unprofitable way of life has two immediate consequences: (1) he will save a person (ψυχῆν) from the result of persistent sins, and (2) will cover sins (1 Pet 4:8 which quotes Prov 1.0:12), that is, will procure forgiveness (Pss 32:1; 85:2; Deut 4:24; Rom 4:7). Καλύπτειν in connection with sins usually means "cause them to be forgotten" (5:20).

The Proverbs context (10:12) of this verse (5:20) says that love covers all transgressions. In context, the idea is "love refuses to see faults." James' use has reference to those who confess they have wronged another, or even wronged each other. The result of the act of confession is that the mutual love arising in such cases will cover up whatever the wrong was, will cause all parties to disregard the sin. The background of this verse is found in Matt 5:23f, 18:15, and Luke 17:3f. where unforgiven sin precludes worship and repentance strengthens Christ's Body.

IV. Conclusion

The understructure of James' theology is the wisdom of Jesus, as our Lord, the Savior taught it and lived it. It is theology requiring faithful obedience. The tests in the book of 1 John are designed to show the existence of the life of God in the Christian. The Epistle of James indicates tests of faith. As we engage ourselves to walk wisely, the function of wisdom will demonstrate the existence of faith and will exhibit its vitality.

James has as his purpose the demonstration of a living faith. But faith is more than an occasional thought; it goes beyond one's attitude. It can only take shape in concrete situations. When the believer obeys

the wise instruction of the Scripture, he walks in wisdom. That application of wise words results in incidents of applied faith. Whether the incidents of observed faith will emerge out of occasions of testing, from situations where one has to decide the extent to which God will control and be responsible for their needs, and under circumstances where human perception would be limited. Wisdom is served when the believer repents personally or engages in the process of restoration of another believer. The proper use of wisdom allows the believer to observe faith at work.

The wisdom James commands us to employ is taught by Christ and emphasized by Paul. The theology of James features an under-structure of the wisdom of Jesus which was taught by Jesus Christ and featured in his life.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

The Criswell College

4010 Gaston Ave.

Dallas, TX 75246

www.criswell.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu