
The Wisdom of James

BY ROBERT W. WALL

The Letter of James, reverberating with themes of biblical wisdom from ancient Israel through the traditions of Jesus and Paul, calls us to be a wise community that walks and talks the “wisdom from above.”

The Letter of James describes Christian wisdom – both its theoretical knowledge and practical know-how – as embodied within a community. Since James reverberates with themes from the rich biblical wisdom tradition – from the sages of ancient Israel through the teachings of Jesus and Paul – we should review the working ideas of that tradition before turning to the letter’s instruction.

The themes of biblical wisdom emerged from the teaching faculty of ancient Israel who sought to educate the public about the rules to follow for a well-lived life. The Hebrew word for wisdom, *hokma*, reflects this classroom setting: its root meaning suggests using our God-given intelligence to pursue the insight and know-how we need in order to negotiate life in the public square.

The prologue to Proverbs (1:2-7) supplies the working grammar of Scripture’s wisdom corpus that includes the Letter of James. The goal is “learning about wisdom and instruction...[for] wise dealing” (1:2-3a). Devotion to the Lord is the essential disposition for this curriculum, while those who doubt God are “fools” who “despise wisdom and instruction” (1:7). The virtues listed here – righteousness, justice, equity, shrewdness, know-how, and prudence (1:3b-4) – catalogue the skill-set of the “wise” who “hear and gain in learning” (1:5). This prologue is for the teacher to guide the education of the “simple” and “young.”

Rival groups within Israel debated the nature of wisdom, whether based on human experience or divine revelation, and therefore the subject matter

of wisdom, whether humanistic or theistic. For example, the collections of pithy sayings included within the Book of the Proverbs or the lyrics of wisdom Psalms (e.g., Psalms 1, 37, 49, 73, 112) distill human experience to forge a self-understanding that works well in all of life. Ecclesiastes and Job, on the other hand, seem to subvert the value of this kind of intelligence to make the theological claim that “wise” judgments about life regard only those things that do not last, however important they are, and so must be reordered by a firm devotion to a transcendent God who endures forever.

The sage’s curriculum is not opposed to the prophet’s admonition to keep Torah. After all, Solomon, the very personification of proverbial wisdom (cf. Proverbs 1:1; 10:1; 25:1), was given divine wisdom for observing Torah (cf. 1 Kings 4:29). In fact, his subsequent spiritual failure shows that the real measure of the wise person is Torah-keeping (cf. James 1:22-25). And Job, whose story was first told by Israel’s sages, exemplifies righteous suffering (cf. James 5:7-11). Obedience does not always result in material prosperity. Both Torah-keeping and righteous suffering are principal characteristics of Christian existence according to James and illustrate the letter’s indebtedness to Jewish wisdom.

The résumé of Matthew’s Jesus, whom James sometimes echoes, includes his work as a teacher of wisdom (cf. Matthew 5-7). While always focused on the practices of building up a community of wise disciples, his prophetic view of human intelligence is conditioned upon “repentance” – an intellectual reorientation that aligns the converted with those beliefs and practices that herald the coming victory “on earth” of God’s reign “as it is in heaven.” The wisdom of Jesus is articulated, then, against the future horizon of this new creation in which human life is brought into conformity with the Creator’s way of ordering the world.

Perhaps because the patterns of Jesus’ prophetic wisdom depart so radically from a common-sense approach to life, the Pauline witness says the gospel may seem “foolish” to outsiders, especially when believers identify with the crucified Christ, “who became for us wisdom from God” (1 Corinthians 1:30). According to Pauline preaching, the wise community is shaped by a Christological understanding of the world that “none of the elites of this age” can understand since only by the Spirit is the mind of Christ – the wisdom of God – made known to those who profess him as risen Lord (1 Corinthians 2:6-16).

Almost certainly these two dominant New Testament traditions, Jesus and Paul, inhabit a Jewish (more than Greek) conception of wisdom. The broad range of practical and religious ideas in the Sermon on the Mount, for example, pick up the core themes of wisdom that the prologue to Proverbs puts into play – righteousness, faithfulness, knowledge, and devotion to God. Jesus, however, personifies wisdom and his radical acts of fidelity and love are the supreme characteristics of “wise dealing.” According to his

instruction, the real world is the kingdom of God and for this his wisdom is “hidden from the wise and intelligent” of this world (Matthew 11:25). Pauline instruction is also shaped by apocalyptic sensibilities and so contends that divine wisdom is inaccessible to those outside of Christ who suppress natural revelation (cf. Romans 1:19-23) and are without the Spirit’s illumination (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:15).

The mention of “James” in the letter’s salutation (1:1) is likely not an attribution of authorship but a rhetorical cue that alerts readers that this letter belongs to the faith tradition associated with James, the brother of the Lord. The implied author is the “canonical” James whose enduring legacy is reflected by his status in the New Testament story.

According to the Book of Acts, for example, he is a pastor rather than a missionary; and his congregation in Jerusalem comprises Jewish believers who seek to preserve the church’s Jewish heritage when possibly attenuated by the initiation of repentant pagans into the covenant-keeping community (cf. Acts 21:17-26; Galatians 2:11-14). Significantly, the James of Acts contends that the purification of the heart by faith in Christ, while necessary for salvation, is an insufficient condition for membership in a covenant-keeping congregation (Acts 15:13-21): a pagan’s genuine repentance is also marked out by those purity practices of a more Jewish kind (cf. 15:20, 29; 21:26). This more robust conception of purity comports well with his public reputation for piety and righteousness – traits of the proverbially wise leader – reported by Christian historian Eusebius three centuries later.

The biblical story of James is climaxed by his Easter conversion (1 Corinthians 15:7; cf. Acts 1:14). This story shapes the reader’s view of the book of James: it is the letter of a pastor who was converted on Easter by the risen One and who intends to complete the profession of a congregation’s faith with works of purity that witness to his risen brother and Lord. From this Easter angle, the patterns of the edgy wisdom found in James are apprehended by the reader as resurrection practices.

The intended readers of James are introduced as “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion [*diaspora*]” – a metaphor for faithful disciples who form a *diaspora* community and who approach this letter’s exhortation as exiles,

dislocated and marginalized within an alien world because of their faith (1:1-3; cf. 1 Peter 2:11). In this case, the instruction of James shapes “wise dealings” as the prologue to Proverbs promises, but not to secure the financial future of the poor or political stability of the powerless. Rather these “words of insight” herald the prospect of participation in the coming

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victory of God. In this sense, “wise dealing” obtains to those spiritual transactions that prove a people’s friendship with God, heirs of God’s kingdom.

NATURE AND SOURCE OF WISDOM: JAMES 1:1-21

Two parallel statements (1:2-11; 1:12-21) set out a powerful vision of Christian existence. Central to the letter’s conception of discipleship is the routine experience of “trials of any kind” (1:2) and the Christian’s “joyful” response to them. Hardship occasions the scrutiny of an intelligent mind that “considers” life’s hostile circumstances and “knows” them for what they really are: “the testing of your faith” (1:3).

On the one hand, believers can respond to trials with “nothing but joy” because they know of a coming age, promised by God, when those whose faith endures will be made “mature and complete, lacking in nothing” (1:4b). This joyful confidence is subsequently restated as a beatitude in 1.12, reminiscent of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-11), that God will bless those who “endure temptation” with “the crown of life” (cf. Revelation 2:10) as recompense for their devotion to God.

On the other hand, trials can tempt to spiritual failure those immature believers who are “unstable in every way” (1:8). Because “trials” and “temptation” (1:13) translate the same Greek word, *peirasmos*, readers readily make the connection between their suffering and spiritual testing. Indeed, hardship can produce either “endurance” (1:3)—a steady allegiance to God—or it can “give birth to sin...and to death” (1:14-15). Although demonic impulses (cf. 3:15; 4:5,7) or other external factors (cf. 2:2-7; 5:1-6) may be involved in prompting the believer’s inward response to trial, James stresses one’s responsibility to make wise choices since one’s inward “desires” are “one’s own” (1:14) to control.

If God is trusted as a generous and impartial benefactor (1:5), believers will petition God for the know-how they lack in order to deal with their trials in a wise manner—that is, in a manner that will secure an eternal blessing from God. In this regard, prayer is a “considered” and “knowing” response to trials, when asked in the firm belief that the nature of God is generous and the promised future of God’s reign is secured by the Lord’s resurrection. Rather than doubting God’s goodness (1:6-8), then, or being deceived into thinking that God is somehow responsible for one’s trials (1:16), the wise thing to do is address God as “the Father of lights with whom there is no variation” (1:17b). Reasoned prayer addresses a generous God who responds to human need in only one way: with “generous acts of giving every perfect gift” (1:17a).

The gift God gives to those who ask is “the word of truth” (1:18). It is a “perfect” (*teleios*) gift not only because it is given by God but because it supplies the wisdom necessary to endure trials, the “full effect” of which is a life that is “mature (*teleios*) and complete” (1:4).¹ The summation of this divine wisdom is marked out by firm exhortation, “You must understand

this, my beloved" (1:19a). But the letter's stock synthesis of proverbial wisdom after so powerful a build-up may seem anticlimactic: "let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger" (1:19b). Only when we come to the letter's main body do we find a fresh and elaborate commentary of this "implanted word that has the power to save your souls" (1:21).

THE WISE COMMUNITY WALKS THE TALK: JAMES 1:22-2:26

The Letter of James consists of three essays – in the sequence announced in the proverbial rubric of 1:19 – that expound on the way of wisdom. The first essay (1:22-2:26) interprets and applies the wisdom of "quick listening." To listen quickly means to obey the "perfect law of liberty" promptly (1:22-25). In particular, the "royal law" (2:8) demands merciful treatment of the poor neighbor (1:26-2:7). The community that loves the neighbor in distress deals wisely with them. To show them mercy constitutes prompt obedience to the law of liberty; and this practice is the manner of wisdom, not only because it liberates those in distress but because God returns mercy for mercy at the end of the age (2:12-13; cf. 1:12).

The distress of "orphans and widows" (1:27) – a biblical metaphor for society's most vulnerable members – occasions a spiritual test for the entire community. The care of poor and powerless believers is a hallmark of God's covenant-keeping people (cf. Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 24:17-21; Psalm 146:9; Isaiah 1:17; Jeremiah 5:28; Acts 2:45; 4:32-35; 6:1-7; 9:36-42); to abandon them not only subverts the community's religious identity but also runs the risk of God's displeasure (2:12-13). Two case studies follow. In the first one, community leaders discriminate against the poor and favor the rich by giving them the best places when seating them "into your assembly" (2:2-4). Such social practices are blatantly foolish in an assembly of the "glorious Lord Jesus Christ" (2:1) who exemplified compliance with God's preferential option for the poor (cf. Luke 14:7-14). The second case is set in a civil law-court rather than a religious assembly. The contrast draws a damning analogy between the foolish actions of the community's leaders and the very rich they privilege who "drag you into court...and blaspheme the excellent name" of Jesus (2:6-7; cf. Luke 18:1-8).

Two responses are appraised differently by God (1:26-27). "Hearers of the word but not doers" are deluding themselves: they think they are religious when in fact what they profess during religious rituals is worthless to God if not acted upon (1:26; cf. 1:22-23; 2:15-16). On the other hand, "God the Father" appraises as "pure and undefiled" the religion characterized by what its members actually do: they care for the poor and powerless without being contaminated "by the world" (1:27). Such a religion is shaped by the wisdom of James. The irony of the exhortation to obey rather than merely to hear turns on the fact that the word translated "listen" also means "obey" (cf. Romans 10:16). "Mirror" is a common trope of illumination among the rabbis and is used here to deepen the irony: a

mirror is useless in the fool's hand who "immediately forgets" what is observed and remains unchanged (1:23-24).

James' commentary on the wisdom of quick listening focuses on the object that is carefully heard: "the perfect (*teleios*) law of liberty" (1:25). While a "perfect law" surely has a divine origin (cf. Psalm 18(19):7, Septuagint), the prior uses of "perfect" in James (1:4, 17) forge a still thicker meaning that helps relate the continuing role of the law to the moral practices of a covenant-keeping community. "Perfect" in James signifies the endgame of Christian existence, formed in faithful reception of God's gifts (1:17-18) and in response to spiritual tests (1:3-4). The implication is that the biblical Torah is a divine auxiliary that continues to disclose a "word of truth" to the community in order to "save your souls." The wise response, then, is to obey quickly what God's "perfect law" demands.

The "law of liberty" resonates with Paul's "law of Christ" in that its demand obligates believers to free each other from their burdens (Galatians 6:2; cf. 5:1). However in James the referent of this phrase more narrowly trades upon Torah's Jubilee legislation: the "law of liberty" concerns "the year of liberty" (Leviticus 25:8-24), which became important especially during the Second Temple period for fashioning a sociological model of God's coming kingdom (cf. Luke 4:16-21; James 2:5). The promise of future blessing introduced in 1:12 is here repeated to link enduring temptation and trials with the wisdom of law-keeping (1:25).

The question posed in James 2:1 is better translated, "Do you have the faith of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?" This recalls the similar phrase used by Paul in which "the faith of Jesus Christ" (cf. Romans 3:22; Galatians 3:22) is a subjective genitive of the crucified Christ's faithfulness to God (cf. Philippians 2:5-8), which secures God's promise of salvation from sin. But the wisdom of James' question is aimed differently – not at Christ's cross (as for Paul), but at his ministry among the poor and powerless. That is, Jesus' self-sacrificial faithfulness to God as Messiah is embodied by doing the "perfect law of liberty" and is glorified "in (his) doing" (1:25). Jesus obeyed the kingdom's rule of law by not failing its "royal" (=kingly) demand to treat his poor neighbors according to God's preferential option for the poor (2:5).

Besides the example of Jesus, two other biblical figures, Abraham and Rahab, are mentioned to underwrite the wisdom of caring for the poor in their distress. Their cases are introduced by the common sense assertion that the mere profession of orthodox faith does not save anyone if not demonstrated by works. That is, if a pious benediction, "go in peace," is given to the hungry and naked without also feeding and clothing them, what practical good results for either (2:14-17)? Or if a believer professes orthodox faith apart from works, how is his destiny any different than the shuddering demons who do the same (2:18-20)?

The combination of patriarch Abraham (2:21-24) and prostitute Rahab

(2:25) form a merism – a figure of speech uniting two images to point to one reality – that underwrites the universally valid claim: “faith without works is dead” (2:26). In Jewish tradition, the story of Isaac’s binding (Genesis 22; cf. James 2:21) narrates Abraham’s final exam and the grade he receives from God is confirmation of the promises made to him that secures Israel’s destiny as God’s elect people. In James’ handling of the tradition, Abraham exemplifies how a profession of orthodox faith – Abraham is the first monotheist according to Jewish tradition – must be “brought to completion by works” (2:22). Only then is the believer befriended by God with a future secured by divine promise (2:23).

Rahab’s biblical story (Joshua 2:1-21) makes this same point by what it does and does not mention. Hardly another biblical figure offers a more impressive profession of faith than does Rahab (cf. Joshua 2:8-11); yet James does not mention it. Only her hospitable and courageous actions toward “the messengers” are noted. The rhetorical effect is to impress upon the reader that the wise believer understands that God befriends people on the basis of their merciful “works and not by faith alone” (2:24).

THE WISE COMMUNITY TALKS THE WALK: JAMES 3:1-18

The wisdom of “slow speaking” is especially suited for readers of the Diaspora (1:1) where daily trials make the experience of dislocation even more destabilizing (3:1-6) and guidance from “wise and understanding” teachers is at a premium (3:13-14). Under these difficult circumstances, the temptation of unedifying speech is made more intense by the inherent difficulty of controlling what is said (3:7-10). The “pure” speech of the community (3:17) guided by “wisdom from above” insures that a “harvest of righteousness” will be sown (3:15-18).

Teachers may be tempted to slander one another to elevate their status within the community (cf. 3:14). The wisdom of slow speaking is directed at teachers by a teacher (“we who teach”) with the warning that “not many of you should become teachers” (3:1). This warning is rooted in two beliefs already explored by James. First is the realistic assessment that even believers lack the wisdom necessary to control the inward desires that incline them toward doubt and sin (1:5-6, 7-8, 13-15). That is, “all of us make many mistakes” (3:2). Second is the bracing awareness that God will judge believers on the basis of what they say and do (1:12; 2:12-13).

To slow down what one says is not a matter of better diction; it concerns the careful choice of words used. The difficulty the teacher faces in this regard is illustrated by a triad of familiar examples with increasing threat. Controlling what is said (i.e., the tongue) is like the skillful use of a bit to control the movement of a horse (3:3) or the pilot’s handling of a rudder to maneuver a ship through strong winds to safe harbor (3:4-5a). The final example envisages the tongue as a “small fire” (literally, “spark”) that destroys a great forest (3:5b-6a).

By this exaggerated example James now can clarify the problem of careless speech, even if by an obscure comparison in 3:6. A “world of iniquity” that “stains” the “whole body” recalls 1:27, which describes the religion of practice as resistant to the “stains” that contaminate a community’s standing “before God, the Father.” If the “tongue” is a metaphor for speech, then James defines the wisdom of “slow to speak” as the constraint a responsible teacher exercises when speaking “among our members.” Put negatively, not to control what is said “stains the whole body” and redirects the community’s destiny away from God’s reign toward a future “inflamed by *Gehenna*” (my translation; cf. Mark 9:45, 47; 1 Enoch 26-27).²

The application of the wisdom of talking the Christian walk is framed by a practical question: “Who is wise and understanding among you?” (3:13). The question alludes to Moses’ instruction for Israel to search for “wise and understanding” leaders to broker disputes that might threaten the tribal confederacy (cf. Deuteronomy 1:12-13). The readers of this letter, faced with their own search for congregational leaders/teachers, are guided by a sharply worded contrast between two different kinds of wisdom with very different outcomes.

The wise and understanding teacher bears a skill that is not learned from experience or education; rather its source is a “wisdom from above” (3:17; cf. 1:17-18). Unlike the foolish teacher whose selfish character (cf. 3:14, 16a) is formed by a wisdom that “does not come down from above, but is... devilish” (3:15) and whose résumé chronicles “disorder and wickedness of every kind” (3:16b), the wise and understanding teacher is formed by “the wisdom from above” and mediates “a harvest of righteousness sown in peace” (3:18).

The virtues in 3:17 characterize the peace-making speech of the wise and understanding teacher. James assumes that believers must take responsibility for their destiny with God by making wise choices that resist doubt or their desire for worldly evils.

THE WISE COMMUNITY SLOWS ANGER: JAMES 4:1-5:6

Anger toward others comes from an inward passion for material pleasure (4:1-3). The experience of being without things can provoke the impulse to covet the worldly goods of others (4:4-5). This tests the believer’s confidence in a God who promises to resist the arrogant and exalt the pious poor (4:6-12; cf. 2:5). The wise find satisfaction in God while the foolish indulge their self-centered passion for material profit without consideration of God’s will for human existence (4:13-17). Ironically, the misery of mistreated workers foreshadows the misery of their greedy employers in the last days, when they will lose not only their wealth but even their lives at the judgment of God (5:1-6; cf. 2:13).

The conflict between friendship with God (cf. 2:23) and “friendship with the world” (4:4; cf. 1:27; 3:6) is embodied in the internal conflict between

two competing “spirits” inherent of every person. Rabbinical tradition identifies these spirits as *y’sārîm* – one inclined toward evil, the other toward good. In response to this spiritual reality, then, verse 5 is better translated to pose a pair of rhetorical questions that expect a negative answer: “Or do you think Scripture says foolish things? Does the spirit that God made to dwell within us incline us intensely towards envy?” Such an appraisal is patently false, of course, since Scripture discloses wisdom while “envy” provokes sorrow in one who lacks but desires worldly pleasures (cf. 4:1-3; cf. 3:16)!

Scripture does teach, however, that God will “give grace” and finally “exalt” those of “humble” circumstance while opposing the “proud” (4:6, 10; cf. 1:9-11; 2:5). The two couplets (4:7-8a, 8b-9) bracketed by this *inclusio* of economic reversal employ the idiom of worship to envisage a repentant people’s inclination toward God and away from the world and its “devil.” The series of imperatives in the second couplet call the community to practice worship that will prepare it for a religious pilgrimage by following a protocol of purification, which marks its separation away from “friendship with the world” toward friendship with God. The eschatological destination of the community’s pilgrimage through life is described in 4:11-12 with a summary of the letter’s key themes. In this case, the “doer of the law” who will be blessed by God is the one who obeys the command not to covet his neighbor’s possessions.

The opening invocative, “Come now” (4:13a; 5:1a), links together two examples of the corruption of wealth that illustrate the wisdom of resisting the impulse toward coveting what others possess, the real source of bitter interpersonal conflicts. The first illustration is of a merchant (4:13-17) whose financial “pilgrimage”

(*contra* 4:8b-9) will take him on a journey “to such and such a town” (rather than the kingdom of God) in order to “do business” (rather than God’s law; so 4:15) and “make money” (rather than receive God’s blessing). The shift of pronoun to “you” (4:14)

suggests the merchant, characterized as “arrogant” (4:16), typifies those opposed by God who earlier are called “proud” (4:6). These are the functional atheists who live their lives as though God does not exist. In particular, the proud make foolish choices as though there is no future apocalypse when God will judge all people according to what they have done, whether the “right thing” or “sin” (4:17; cf. 4:11-12; 2:13).

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The second illustration of a rich farmer (5:1-6) more vividly expresses the destiny of those who choose friendship with the world rather than with God: they will “wail for the miseries that are coming” (5:1). The wealthy choose against God on the basis of two catastrophic mistakes. One involves the durability of material goods: “riches rot...clothes are moth-eaten...gold and silver rust” (5:2-3; cf. Matt 6:19-21). The other mistake involves God’s assessment of injustice. The luxurious lifestyle of the rich and famous, purchased at the expense of workers who are mistreated and underpaid, is evidence of malpractice used against them in the heavenly court-case convened by “the Lord of hosts” (5:4). Their condemnation will be executed in “the last days” (5:3) on a “day of slaughter” (5:5).³

THE FUTURE OF THE WISE COMMUNITY: JAMES 5:7-20

The letter concludes in the same literary manner by which it begins: with the interplay of parallel statements (5:7-12, 5:13-20). Each is a triad of exhortations that recall important catchwords from the letter’s opening. Together they form an *inclusio* that frames the three essays in between. But this conclusion is more than a mere retrospective on James’ conception of Christian existence; it supplies the principal motivation for following the letter’s wisdom: the coming triumph of the Lord is near (5:7-9). The farmer’s experience waiting for “the early and the late rains” (5:7) to water the crops to harvest exemplifies the kind of intelligent patience that awaits God’s ultimate victory. This exhortation is made more urgent by the pointed assertion that the Lord’s *parousia* is imminent (5:8) – “see, the Judge is standing at the doors” (5:9).

The exhortation not to engage in “grumbling against one another so that you may not be judged” (5:9) recalls the story of Job (5:11) who endured to the end despite his complaining friends. James places him among the prophets who suffered with patient confidence when they “spoke in the name of the Lord” (5:10; cf. Luke 11:47-54). The background for this view of Job is the Septuagint, followed by the *Testament of Job* 51-53, which unlike his portrait in the Hebrew Bible links his famous patience with his merciful treatment of the poor, which in turn is linked to his eventual restoration by a “compassionate and merciful” God. The second concluding statement is an exhortation to pray for healing (5:13-16a). Patience and prayerfulness are the twin dispositions of an apocalyptic worldview, which views Christian existence before the Lord’s arrival through the lens of suffering and powerlessness. The opening imperative to pray for those who lack wisdom (1:5-6), which when “implanted” and acted upon is able to “save the soul” (1:21), is here recast as “the prayer of faith will save the sick” (5:15). The elders are summoned because they “implant” the saving word in the community’s life and so now lead in a liturgy of healing that “prays over (the sick)” and “anoints them with oil” (5:14). The olive oil administered “in the name of the Lord” can either be understood as medicinal or, more

likely in a worship practice, as invocative of the powerful presence of the risen Lord who “will raise them up” (5:15; cf. Mark 6:13; 9:38; Acts 3:6, 16) – whether at the end of the age or in physical healing is uncertain (cf. Acts 3:19-21). The logical connection between the healing of sickness and the forgiveness of sins is thematic of the gospel tradition.

The earlier uses of “righteousness” in James suggest the “prayer of the righteous” (5:16) is “powerful and effective” because it coheres with God’s pattern of salvation (cf. 2:23-24; 3:18). According to Jewish and Jesus traditions, the prophetic exemplar of effective prayer is Elijah (5:16b-18), whose words on Mount Carmel produced rain because they aligned with God’s words for Israel (1 Kings 18; cf. Sirach 48:1-11, Luke 4:25). That is, prayer offered by the righteous for healing or forgiveness is a practice of wisdom because it produces “powerful and effective” results.

The final verses of James (5:19-20) enlists the audience for a mission to “save the sinner’s soul from death” (cf. 1:21). These sinners are lapsed believers who have “wandered from the truth” of God’s word (cf. 1:18, 21). Without this sacred compass, doubt and inward desire “give birth to sin” and sin to death (1:14-15). The real wisdom of James, then, is clarified by these final words of hope: the repentance and restoration of those believers who have failed their test of faith is mediated by the community made wise for salvation by the instruction of this letter (cf. 2 Timothy 3:15).

NOTES

1 In the Pauline tradition, where human existence outside of Christ struggles against sin, God’s generous response is a revealed “word of truth” (2 Corinthians 6:7; cf. Ephesians 1:13; Colossians 1:5; 2 Timothy 2:15). This Pauline word is the preached gospel which announces to every sinner that “now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2).

2 *Gehenna* is the Hellenized form of Hinnom, a valley used as a garbage dump near Jerusalem, which became an important metaphor for evil and a possible location for the great eschatological battle when God’s good triumphs over the Devil’s evil (cf. Isaiah 66:23-24). No doubt this is the subtext of James 3:6.

3 The mention of the murder of a single “righteous one” (James 5:6) may refer to the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53:11; cf. Luke 23:47). But in this letter that emphasizes God’s vindication of the pious poor and indictment of the rich, it more likely functions as a metonym for poor laborers who are starving for lack of food, either because of neglect (especially during famine) or juridical injustice (cf. James 2:6-7).



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