OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

The Power of Words (1)

David Anguish

R. Wayne Stacy has written:

> Words, it seems, are fickle, capricious little things that twist and turn with the slightest provocation. Perhaps that's one of the reasons speech has become so discredited and devalued in our culture. The quickest way to deprecate something is to banish it to the lotus land of words. "Ah, it's just hearsay." "Talk is cheap." "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words…" (Stacy 2000, 230).

Stacy goes on to say that, as a Jew, James knew of stories like that of Jacob tricking Esau to secure the blessing (Gen 27) and therefore would have understood that "words had power which, once spoken, once let loose in the world, cannot be called back or retrieved" (Stacy 2000, 231).

Later in his letter, James shows in more detail the havoc words can wreak (cf. 4.1–2, 11–12; 5.9; etc.). He lays the foundation for those applications in 3.2–12 with teaching that employs multiple illustrations to show the serious effects of speech. We need to hear him, and periodically review what he says, for while "we talk with words" and "talk without words only with great difficulty," only "rarely do we talk *about* words" (Stacy 2000, 230; my emphasis).

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Disproportionate Power

In a summary of the principle, James uses the connector "for" (γάρ, *gar*) to tie his warning to teachers (3.1) to what he will write in 3.3–12: "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" (v. 2).

Verses 3–5a emphasize that "the tongue's effectual power is out of proportion to its size" (McCartney 2009, 184). While James wants to show the dangerous side of that power, it is important to remember that it can and often does have a positive effect, as he summarizes in verse 5a: "So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things (μεγάλα αὐχεῖ, *megala auchei*)." Αὐχέω (*aucheō*, "boast") appears only here in the NT, but it has the same meaning as the forms of καυχάομαι (*kauchaomai*) which are more commonly used (see Louw & Nida 1989, § 33.368). While "boast" often has a negative connotation, which James uses in 3.14 and 4.16, it is also used in contexts where boasting is appropriate and therefore a good thing. James uses it that way in 1.9 with regard to the lowly brother who "boast[s] in his exaltation," and perhaps also in 2.13, which could be translated, "mercy boasts over (κατακαυχάομαι, *katakauchaomai*) judgment."

He illustrates the tongue's disproportionate power with two figures familiar to his culture, but also easily understandable in ours. First, the tongue is like the bit of a horse's bridle (v. 3). The contrast is stark, as Hughes makes clear when he writes, "a horse is half a ton of raw power! Yet, place a bridle and bit in its mouth and a 100-pound woman on its back who knows what she is doing and the animal can literally be made to dance" (Hughes 1991, 137). Similarly, a ship—whether ancient or one of today's massive ocean liners—is steered by one man controlling a rudder that is a fraction of the ship's size (v. 4). These figures remind us of what both experience and God's word teach: the tongue can be used as an influence for good (cf. Prov 15.22, 31; 16.24), but if utilized for evil ends, it can do considerable harm (cf. Prov 15.1b, 4b; 16.27; 18.21). (For a more recent illustration of this divergence, compare the aims and impact of the rhetoric of Winston Churchill to those of Adolf Hitler.)

In verses 5b–6, James illustrates the dangers posed by an unbridled tongue. Just as a spark can start a fire that consumes thousands of acres, so "the tongue is a fire" (vv. 5b–6a). As such, it is "a world of unrighteousness" or, alternately, "an unrighteous world" (ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας, *ho kosmos tēs adikias*) (v. 6a; see McCartney 2009, 185–187). That is, it can lead to multiple evils (just think of all the sins that begin with harsh words, seductive words, etc.). Thus, although it is but one of our body members—and a comparatively small one at that—the tongue is capable of "staining the whole body" (v. 6). "Stain" (σπιλόω, *spiloō*), brings to mind the image of a garment with a stain or spot (Louw & Nida 1989, § 79.58), as for example red dye that spreads quickly to discolor every part of the fabric (William Baker, cited in Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 158). As the opposite of "unstained" (ἄσπιλος, *aspilos*), which James used in 1.27, James's statement in 3.6

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points to the reality that an out-of-control tongue infecting the whole person can undermine and even eradicate the influence of "true religion" which is not to be sullied (1.27) (Moo 159).

Insidious Power

Adding intensity to his description, James concludes it in verse 6 with two phrases that are more difficult of interpretation. First, an out-of-control tongue is capable of "setting on fire the entire course of life." "Course of life" is literally "wheel of generation" (τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως, *ton trochon tēs geneseōs*; cf. ESV note, "wheel of birth"). Some find the background for this phrase in the technical philosophy of Orphic lore (cf. Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 158, who reject this view); Johnson notes that the image of a wheel as symbolic for life's cyclic circumstances was well known in Hellenistic and Rabbinic Judaism and concludes that "the point of the image in James is that the tongue is not only influenced by cosmic evil but affects all of life" (Johnson 1995, 260). Grant Osborne summarizes that the phrase "likely means the 'ups and down' of life. The tongue turns upside down every aspect of life in the community as well as in the individual" (Osborne 2008, 2395).

The tongue can have such an insidious effect because its illicit use has its origins in hell (γέεννα, *gehenna*). This is the only use of *gehenna* outside the gospels where Jesus uses it eleven times to refer to a place of punishment associated with fire (Matt 5.22, 29–30; 10.28; 18.9; 23.15, 33; Mark 9.43, 45, 47; Luke 12.5). The word was used to refer to the valley of the son of Hinnom located west and southwest of Jerusalem. It was the place where Ahaz and Manasseh sacrificed their sons to Molech, abominations Jeremiah summarily denounced (cf. 2 Chron 28.3; 33.6; Jer 7.31–32; 19.6; 32.35) (McCartney 2009, 190 n 20). Later, the valley was used to burn Jerusalem's trash, making it an appropriate figure for fires of punishment; later Jewish writers used it to refer to the entrance to hell and then to hell itself (cf. 4 *Ezra* 7.36) (Wilkins 2002, 39).

Whether James intended the reference to hell to refer to the outcome of punishment or origin of the evil associated with the tongue is debated. Following Richard Bauckham, Blomberg and Kamell conclude that the idea of *punishment* follows "the principle of the crime fitting the punishment (the tongue that starts a 'fire' ends up being punished by 'fire') and finds a closer parallel in *Psalms of Solomon* 12:1–4)" (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 159). But the wording of the text and subsequent context of James favor the *origin* interpretation. Note that James expresses the action in verse 6 with three present participles: "staining" (σπιλοῦσα, *spilousa*), "setting on fire" (φλογίζουσα, *phlogizousa*), and "being set on fire" (φλογιζομένη, *phlogizomenē*) [McCartney notes that the progressive nature of the three "should be read as expressing general characteristics of the wicked tongue, not necessarily continuous action" (McCartney 2009, 195)]. The first two are active voice, but the third is passive (as the translations consistently render it), indicating that James intends to say that, when engaged in evil speech, the tongue has been *influenced by* "hell," best understood as a metonym for either the devil or evil generally. This agrees with his

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later reference to wisdom that comes from the demonic (Jas 3.15), as well as with Jesus calling it the "gehenna of fire" (Matt 5.22; 18.9) (McCartney 2009, 190–191). Thus, as Moo writes, "the power of Satan himself, the chief denizen of hell, gives to the tongue its great destructive potential" (Moo 2000, 160).

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"Reprinted from David Anguish, 'Opening the Scriptures,' August 27, 2024"
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