OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Murder at Church?

David Anguish

> *I have often wondered that persons who make boast of professing the Christian religion—namely love, joy, peace, temperance, and charity to all men—should quarrel with such rancorous animosity and display daily towards one another such bitter hatred, that this, rather than the virtues which they profess, is the readiest criteria of their faith.*
> ~ Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus,* chap 6 [in Moo 2000, 181]

Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza's (1632–1677) statement from the seventeenth century is representative of the adverse effects of feuds and divisions that have long dimmed the church's light. The problem predates Spinoza, of course, by centuries. We see evidence of it already in the NT period, as for example in the persistent challenge Paul faced from "those from the circumcision" (τοὺς ἐκ περιτομῆς; *tous ek peritomēs*; Gal 2.12 NASB 2020; cf. Acts 10.45; 11.2; Tit 1.10; also Acts 15.1–6; Gal 2.10–14; 5.2, 6; 6.15; Phil 3.3); in his references to the divisions in Corinth (cf. σχίσμα [*schisma*], ἔρις [*eris*], and αἵρεσις [*hairesis*] in 1 Cor 1.10–11; 3.3; 11.18–19; 12.20, 25; 2 Cor 12.20); and in John's reference to the departure of the antichrists from his community (1 John 2.18–19). We also see it in James, notably in 4.1–2:

> What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.

Copyright 2025 by David Anguish

As previously noted (here, here), some see the entirety of James's letter as a collection of meditations (or homilies) on various subjects. Others view it as more thematic but see "a significant break in James's argument between chap. 3 and chap. 4" (Moo 2000, 179). But on closer examination, it is evident that the beginning of chapter 4 continues the theme begun no later than 3.13, and likely as early as 3.1.[1] As Moo observes,

> James's discussion of wisdom in vv. 13–18 is very specifically focused. He is not really interested in talking about wisdom per se, but in that fruit of wisdom which brings order and peace to the church. Seen in this light, vv. 13–18 prepare the way perfectly for James's rebuke of quarreling in the church (Moo 2000, 179).

Especially relevant is James's reference to "jealousy and selfish ambition" that lead to "disorder and every vile practice" (Jas 3.16). These outcomes of earthly wisdom are at odds with the results of the wisdom from above, especially with James's implied appeal to "make peace" (3.15–18). So, in James 4.1–12, he urges his readers to take action to stop their quarreling and fighting. He then commands them to identify the reasons for their behavior, examine their motives and priorities, and recommit themselves to unreserved submission to God by acts of penance and renewal.

But what was the nature of their conflicts? Were they merely verbal or did they also involve violence? Commentators differ in their interpretation of the behavior James is confronting. In the balance of this essay and the next, we'll focus on efforts to discern the nature of the conflict.

Murderous Quarrels

The word "murder" (φονεύω, *phoneuō*) in verse 2 is the focal point of the debate. Some commentators affirm that it should be understood literally, as a declaration that the strife among James's readers had led to the taking of human life. As Moo summarizes their position, they contend that, while the word "fights" (μάχαι, *machai*) means "battles," "strife," or "disputes" of any kind (cf. Bauer 2000, 622), when it is paired, as in James 4.1, with "quarrels" (πόλεμοι, *polemoi*), it almost always refers to literal wars and battles (cf. Moo 2000, 180).

Ralph Martin is one who argues for a literal interpretation of *phoneuō*. Noting the prevalence of political tensions in mid-first century Palestine, he calls attention to the Zealots, the Jewish party characterized by "a religious jealousy for the exclusive honour of Israel's God against anyone or anything that threatened to diminish his honour" (Bruce 1972, 93). Referencing F. F. Bruce's discussion of the Zealot party (Bruce 1972, 93–100), Martin observes that their activities escalated in the mid-first century as they sought the overthrow of Rome by any means, an effort that led to Rome's forceful response and the eventual destruction of Jerusalem. Since it is possible that

[1] The role of speech in the strife in 4.1–12 is the basis for seeing the beginning of the section in 3.1. See e.g., Martin, who comments, "In the light of the party spirit decried in 3:13–17, which is preceded by the discourse against the abuse of the tongue on the part of the teachers, it appears that James describes the consequence of these teachers' wrongdoing in 4:1" (Martin 1988, 144).

Copyright 2025 by David Anguish

some believers may have been former Zealots, Martin argues that "the taking of another's life is not out of the realm of possibility for the church members as a response to disagreement" (Martin 1988, 144). Supporting this in his view is the fact that the Zealots also had a strong hatred for the wealthy (cf. Bruce 1972, 100), a factor he believes at least partially accounts for James's interest in the tensions between rich and poor (1.9–11; 2.1–7; 5.1–6).

In response to those who think James's use of *phoneuō* is metaphorical, Martin writes,

> To say that all James means here [by *phoneuō*] is "hate" (Matt. 5:21-22; 1 John 3:15) overlooks the fact that the letter of James was most likely written in a period when murder was accepted as a "religious" way to solve disagreements (for full illustration cf. Acts 9:1 [φόνου, murder]; John 16:2). It is quite possible that James had thrown his lot in with the needy priests of Jerusalem (some of whom had converted to Christianity), who, in turn, showed sympathy with the Zealot movement. Combine this with the hatred that Zealots had for the wealthy (F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, 100; [Martin,] *Introduction*, p. lxviii) and it may easily be imagined that some of the Christians may have had need of correction when they attempted to solve the disagreements within the church.... It is possible that if some of the Christians James wrote to were former Zealots, they might not have been willing too quickly to renounce violence as a way of securing religious freedom. Other suggestions—that James is predicting what might happen in the future (Moo [1985], 141) or that he is only referring to what generally happens when desire overtakes a person (Ropes, 255)—do not go far enough. James is exhorting his readers not to kill any more (see 2:11; 5:6; see Randall, *Epistle of James*, 30-31, 113), i.e., to abandon a way of life—and death (Martin 1988, 146).

Similarly, Michael Townsend affirms that, while James's readers were Christians, "their loyalties were still Jewish, and it is perfectly possible that a number of them had been involved in such [Zealot] activities" (Townsend 1975, 212). Noting the widespread popular support for the Zealot movement circa 55–60 AD, when he thinks James was written, Townsend argues that Christians could not escape the issue. "Whether they wished it or not, every Jew in Palestine was forced to take some sort of stand regarding the issue. There was always a problem for the Christian Church in its relations with nationalism" (Townsend 1975, 212). Accordingly, he argues,

> It may well be therefore, that some Jewish Christian converts had not realized the incompatibility of Christian faith and Zealot nationalism. They still earnestly desired a theocratic kingdom of justice and peace and there seemed only one obvious way to achieve it. James therefore points out to them that their desire to achieve their own ends, their own pleasure rather than God's, is a violation of God's rule in history, whereby he and not man decrees what will happen (Townsend 1975, 212).

A Preliminary Response

We will elaborate more in part 2 but will note here two objections that have been made to a literal interpretation of murder in James 4.2. First, while it is true that we have insufficient information to definitively identify the specific cultural circumstances of James's readers—a point that cuts both ways in this discussion—Moo's observation that we are correct to "wonder whether

Copyright 2025 by David Anguish

James would have been content with the little he says here had the believers to whom he is writing actually been killing one another" (Moo 2000, 180) is well taken.

Second, as Martin acknowledges, we do have other NT examples where "murder" is metaphorical. In view of the indications that James was aware of Jesus's words, particularly the Sermon on the Mount (here), it is reasonable to affirm that he is following the Lord's example as a way to stress how serious their quarrels and fights were (cf. Matt 5.21–22).

Works Cited

Walter Bauer. 2000. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. ed. Frederick W. Danker. 3rd ed. University of Chicago Press.

F. F. Bruce. 1972 (1969). *New Testament History*. Anchor Books.

Ralph P. Martin. 1988. *James*. Word Biblical Commentary. vol. 48. Word Books.

Douglas J. Moo. 1985. *The Letter of James: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

_____. 2000. *The Letter of James*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Michael J. Townsend. 1975. "James 4:1–4: A Warning Against Zealotry?" *Expository Times* 87: 211–213.

Additional Thoughts on James

"In 3:17, James is deliberate to state a foremost characteristic of the wisdom from above: it is *first of all pure* and only then the other qualities. His term *pure* speaks of holiness and provides the immediate contrast to *every evil practice*. It reflects the high moral sensibility that we have found in James all along: he does not descend from it now. It is never a sentimental humanitarianism or an amoral pragmatism that motivates James; it isn't just that bitter envy hurts people or that selfish ambition does not work. The first and foremost reason for valuing wisdom is that it will lead people to do what is morally right. Today's popular relativism makes it all the more urgent that Christians learn James's passion for purity. Will we do what is wise *first of all* because it is right?"

~ George M. Stulac. 1993. *James*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series. ed. Grant R. Osborne. InterVarsity Press.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV
(All emphasis in Bible quotations added by the author)

Permission is granted to reprint original materials with the credit line,
"Reprinted from David Anguish, 'Opening the Scriptures,' February 11, 2025"

Copyright 2025 by David Anguish

Feedback is welcome. Direct comments to david@davidanguish.com

To receive each new issue of this newsletter in your inbox, click here.

Interested in purchasing James resources at a discounted price? Check out AbeBooks.com. (As an AbeBooks affiliate, I earn from qualified purchases generated from links on my website. There is no extra cost for you. For direct links to books on James and other resources, click *here* to go to my Affiliate Links page.)

Want to help support my writing ministry? Consider expressing your appreciation by leaving a *donation*.

Copyright 2025 by David Anguish