OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Murder, Envy, or Metaphor?

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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. ~ James 4.1–2

Students of James differ in their interpretation of James's use of "murder" (φονεύω, *phoneuō*) in James 4.2. Is he addressing acts of violence committed against other believers? Does he use "murder" at all? Or does he use it metaphorically or hypothetically to show how serious their conflicts were or warn them of what could be? All three interpretations have been proposed.

We previously considered the arguments in favor of a literal understanding of *phoneuō* offered by Ralph Martin and Michael Townsend and noted two rejoinders to the literal interpretation view. We turn now to the proposed alternative to "murder," and then to the metaphorical interpretation.

Not Murder, but Envy

Beginning with Erasmus, some have posited that verse 2 originally read φθονεῖτε (*phthoneite*; from φθονέω, *phthoneō*), "envy," instead of φονεύετε (*phoneuete*), "murder." Among the reasons put forward in defense of this conclusion is the frequent φθόνος-ζῆλος (*phthonos-zēlos*) pairing in Jewish-Christian literature (e.g., 1 Macc 8.16; 3 Bar. 13.4; Test. Sim. 4.5; Test. Benj.

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4.4; 1 Clem 3.2; 4.7, 13; 5.2) (Davids 1982, 158). Additionally, some have argued that "envy" had to have been James's original wording because the word order as it now stands in James 4.2 presents us with "the so-called 'intolerable climax' of the Gk. *phoneute kai zēloute*" where "psychologically we might expect the sequence to be reversed, murder following rather than preceding envy" (Adamson 1989, 334).[1] In fact, murder-then-envy is not the typical order found in the literary tradition where "murder is regarded as a logical concomitant of envy" and "the logic of competition moves in the direction of elimination" (Johnson 1995, 277) (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 2.10–18; Philo, *Joseph* 5–14; T. Gad. 4.5–6; T. Jos. 1.3; T. Benj. 7.1–2; T. Sim. 3.2–3; also Matt 27.18; Mark 15.10).

Although there are passages where a variant reading should be preferred, "emendation is always a last resort in interpreting a text as rich in manuscript evidence as is the NT" and the reality in this case is that there is no evidence of a textual variant in James 4.2 (Moo 2000, 183–184). Admittedly, the word order and structure of verses 1–2 are difficult—as most commentators acknowledge—and the other proposed solutions, both literal and metaphorical are not without problems (cf. Davids 1982, 158). But in view of the evidence, the emendation interpretation is not tenable.

Murder as Metaphor

Luke Timothy Johnson has elaborated on the *topos* [topic] of envy in the ancient world, in both the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman literary traditions (Johnson 1995, 276–277, 286–287; and at length in Johnson 1994, 182–201). In those sources,

> Envy is constantly associated with wars and battles, as it is with social upheaval: see Anacharsis, *Letter* 9:10–25; Plutarch, *On Tranquility of Soul* 13 (*Mor.* 473B); *On Brotherly Love* 17 (*Mor.* 487E–488C*);* Epictetus, *Discourses,* III, 22, 61; Did, *Or.* 77/78:17–29; *T. Gad* 5:1–6; *T. Jos.* 1:2–7; *T. Sim.* 3:1–5; 4:8–9; *Sentences of Pseudo-Phoclylides* 70–75; Philo*, On Joseph* 5 (Johnson 1995, 276).[2]

Indeed, "envy" (φθόνος, *phthonos*) and "jealousy" (ζῆλος, *zēlos*), which are used interchangeably, "inevitably lead to hostile acts, such as quarrels, murder, and wars" (Moo 2000, 183). This is especially evident in the OT and later Jewish writings where murder is connected metaphorically to sins of the tongue and, in many texts, to jealousy and/or covetousness, as in James 4.2 (cf. Sir. 28.17; Did. 3.2; 1 Clem. 3.4–6.3). In addition, some texts explicitly connect jealousy/covetousness and murder, as for example in the cases of Cain and Abel and Ahab and Naboth (Gen 4.1–8;

[1] In his 1976 commentary, *The Epistle of James,* in the New International Commentary of the New Testament series, James Adamson argued for the textual emendation view. But in his 1989 book, *James: The Man and His Message*, 334–335, he repudiated that conclusion, arguing instead for the metaphorical interpretation.

[2] Moo notes the same tradition in the writing of the second-century AD moralist who "implies an organic relation between envy and violence when he notes that Caesar can free people from 'wars and fightings' (*polemoi kai machai*) but not from 'envy' (*phthonos*)" (*Discourses* 3.13.9; Moo 2000, 183).

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1 Kings 21.1–16). Some NT texts also include both ideas in warnings to Christians (cf. Rom 1.29; 13.9) (Davids 1982, 159).

But, even in the literary tradition, the taking of life is not always the outcome of envy. And of course, Jesus is on record as declaring that inappropriate anger is a violation of the devaluation principle that makes murder wrong (Matt 5.21–22), a declaration that places that anger in the same judgment category as murder. So, there is good reason to think that James might intend his reference to murder to be in some sense metaphorical or, perhaps, hypothetical. Moo opts for the latter, concluding, after an examination of various options, that "perhaps … the best alternative is to take 'you kill' in its normal, literal, sense, but as a hypothetical eventuality rather than as an actual occurrence" (Moo 2000, 184).

Such a warning is not unprecedented (cf. Gen 4.7), and Moo's proposal has merit. But when we also consider the evidence of James's repeated reliance on Jesus's teaching, another solution is preferable. Having focused on "bitter jealousy" and "selfish ambition" as pernicious characteristics of earthly wisdom (Jas 3.14–16), James applies his comments about wisdom to strife in the community that ultimately owes its cause to wrong desires that are left unsatisfied (4.1). He depicts a situation where the participants' frustration increases and so their desire is enhanced to the point of murder, "not in the literal sense, but in the ethical or metaphorical sense of 'cherish murder in your heart,' that is, a hyperbole of 'hate,' or perhaps even pick a quarrel." This "almost certainly reflect[s] the saying of Jesus on 'murder' (Mt. 5:21ff)" (Adamson 1989, 335).

His readers' failure to obtain what they want despite their increased rancor frustrates their desires even more, leading them to "fight and quarrel" (Jas 4.2) and placing them at odds not only with each other, but also with God, a conclusion indicated by the reference to asking and not receiving (in prayer; cf. Jas 1.5) in verse 3 and by the contrast between friendship and enmity with God in verse 4. Since their situation is fraught with spiritual danger, their only recourse is to undertake the decisive actions commanded in verses 7–10: submit and draw near to God; resist the devil (where jealousy and its divisive fruits originate); clean your hands; purify your hearts; mourn over your sins. In short, "humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you" (v. 10).

Conclusion

It is not hard to imagine that, as James wrote the words of 4.1–10, he recalled the fuller statement and application of the principle declared by Jesus in Matthew 5. As we think about his teaching in view of challenges we face from our own desires, we will benefit from hearing Jesus's words again:

> "You have heard that it was said to our ancestors, 'Do not murder,' and whoever murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you, everyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Whoever insults his brother or sister will be subject to the court. Whoever says, 'You fool!' will be subject to hellfire. So if you are offering your gift on the altar, and there you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then come

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> and offer your gift. Reach a settlement quickly with your adversary while you're on the way with him to the court, or your adversary will hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out of there until you have paid the last penny (Matt 5.21–26 CSB).

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Additional Thoughts on James

"Precisely because James does not deal with the issues of a specific community but takes on universal problems of community life and, even more, the perennial temptations of the human heart, his voice sounds across the centuries with remarkable freshness and vigor. In places, James is matched for stylistic verve only by his colleague Paul and his near contemporary Epictetus. One reason James speaks to readers of every age with such immediacy, however, is not merely a matter of style but a matter above all of moral passion and religious conviction."

~ Luke Timothy Johnson. 2004. "An Introduction to the Letter of James." *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 31.

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"Reprinted from David Anguish, 'Opening the Scriptures,' February 25, 2025"

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