OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

"Yes" or "No" Should Do

David Anguish

As a child, did you ever tell someone you would do something, renege on it, and then justify your action by saying, "But I had my fingers crossed"? If so, you were playing a childhood version of a game that, in more sophisticated forms, has been played by adults for centuries. James knew about such games and confronted them directly: "But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'yes' be yes and your 'no' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation" (Jas 5.12).

Verse 12 in the Context of Chapter 5

We must first seek to learn how verse 12 fits with the remainder of James 5. One option is that it is intended to complete the thought in verses 7–11, providing another example of behavior that would leave oppressed believers subject to God's judgment. We find support for this option when we notice that the ESV uses "condemnation" to translate κρίσις (*krisis*), a cognate of the verb and noun translated "be judged" and "Judge" in verse 9 (cf. the NASB which translates it with "judgment" in v. 12). A second option is that verse 12 is intended as the first of the series of closing exhortations that comprise verses 13–18. The third, and preferred, option sees it as a "a bridge between the passive command to persevere patiently without grumbling (5:7–11) and the active command to persevere in prayer (5:13–18)" (McCartney 2009, 245).

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We must also determine the significance of the phrase, "above all" (πρὸ πάντων, *pro pantōn*). Does it indicate that verse 12 is the conclusion to the preceding teaching? Or does James use it to introduce his summation of things to remember, employing a literary device common to epistles of the day (Moo 2000, 230–234)?

Oaths: the Larger Context

Of greater importance is determining what James intends in his reference to an "oath" (ὅρκος, *orkos*), a question that must be settled in view of the broader context of the Old Testament, Jewish literature, and the teaching of Jesus. In the Old Testament, Leviticus 19.12, a chapter James previously cited in 2.8, required only that one not swear "falsely" by the LORD's name; Exodus 22.10–11 commanded the taking of an oath in a matter of dispute; and Deuteronomy 4.31 and 7.8 refer to oaths God had sworn. Later, the prophets would warn the people about taking oaths lightly, but they did not forbid them (Zech 5.3–4; Mal 3.5; cf. Jer 5.2; 7.9; Hos 4.2).

Peter Davids observes that in later Jewish writings, warnings were issued "against oaths whenever possible to prevent their frivolous use" (Davids 1982, 189); an example is Sirach 23.9, 11:

> Do not accustom your mouth to oaths, nor habitually utter the name of the Holy One; … The one who swears many oaths is full of iniquity, and the scourge will not leave his house. If he swears in error, his sin remains on him, and if he disregards it, he sins doubly; if he swears a false oath, he will not be justified, for his house will be filled with calamities (NRSV).

Davids also notes that "some Jewish groups, notably the Essenes, totally prohibited oaths except those of initiation into the group or of properly constituted court procedures" (Davids 1982, 189).

In the New Testament, we read several texts in which the word "swear" (ὀμνύω, *omnyō*; Jas 5.12) is used to refer to oaths taken by God (Luke 1.73; Acts 2.30; Heb 3.11, 18; 4.3; 6.13; 7.21). We also note that, when he was called upon to answer under oath, Jesus did not refuse to do so, though the word itself is absent in the text (cf. Matt 26.63). We also see that Paul sometimes called on God to witness to a point he made (2 Cor 11.11; 1 Thess 2.5; Phil 1.8; cf. Rom 1.9; Gal 1.20; 2 Cor 1.23). Some question whether this witness formula fits the category of an oath (cf. Moo 1985, 175), but Paul's intent is clearly to invoke a higher authority to validate his points.

Of course, Jesus famously addressed the issue in the Sermon on the Mount. His comments, made against the backdrop of what "was said to those of old," echo Leviticus 19.12 and call to mind the emphasis on false swearing found in related texts such as Numbers 30.2 and Deuteronomy 23.21.

> Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely [ἐπιορκέω, *epiorkeō*], but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn [*orkos*].' But I say to you, Do not take an oath [*omnyō*] at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath [*omnyō*] by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply "Yes" or "No"; anything more than this comes from evil (Matt 5.33–37).

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A Question of Integrity

Matthew 23.16–22 expands on 5.33–37 by giving examples of the games Jesus was challenging. Verses 16–19 show that they were used to sidestep direct misuse of God's name while leaving room to renege on a commitment. Verses 20–22 expose their absurdity in theological terms.

> Woe to you, blind guides, who say, "If anyone swears [*omnyō*] by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears [*omnyō*] by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath." You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, "If anyone swears [*omnyō*] by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears [*omnyō*] by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath." You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears [*omnyō*] by the altar swears [*omnyō*] by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears [*omnyō*] by the temple swears [*omnyō*] by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears [*omnyō*] by heaven swears [*omnyō*] by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it" (Matt 23.16–22).

Matthew 5.34–35 states the problem in broader terms than 23.16–22. Verse 36 notes that oath taking makes no difference with regard to reality, and verse 37 declares the intended result: don't use unneeded oaths, just be honest.

Utilizing language that was similar to Jesus's statements (cf. "heaven … earth or by any other oath"), James 5.12 confronts the same practice. Like Jesus, James is concerned with the use of voluntary oaths to get out of honoring commitments instead of cementing them. James reaffirms that people of integrity do not need to play such games. His teaching remains on point, for "in a culture dependent on and dominated by oral speech for communication, the intrusion of an intent to deceive pollutes society at its very source" (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 218; summarizing a point made by Minear 1971).

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An Additional Thought re: James

"*Past, Present, and Future*. Modern Westerners are primarily future oriented. The present is of secondary importance, and the past matters least of all. In the ancient world the present was the most important, then the past, and lastly the future (except for the handful of sufficiently wealthy people who could really plan ahead). In general, Jesus affirmed the value of living in the present—praying only for 'daily bread' (Matt 6:11) and not worrying about tomorrow because of the sufficient troubles of today (v. 34). It is not wrong to plan ahead, but we had better leave room in our planning for God's will to overrule ours (cf. Jas 4:13–17)."

~ Craig L. Blomberg. 2009. *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*. 2nd ed. B&H Academic, 73–74

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