OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Elders Anointing While They Pray, 1

David Anguish

While serving as an education minister in a church, I visited another area congregation where members of my family served. They did not have elders. A man whose wife was seriously ill sought me out to ask if the elders in the church where I served visited the sick to pray over and anoint them. He cited James 5.14: “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.”

His situation and the verse cited prompt some questions: What was the nature and significance of the anointing James had in mind? Would he have expected the practice to continue to the present? Was the brother justified in seeking to apply it to his situation? Would the fact that he was not under the oversight of the elders where I served matter?

Before turning to specific questions about the elders’ prayer and anointing James has in mind, we should review our previous emphasis on the fact that, in the letter’s larger context, the sickness/weakness in view is another of the trials that have formed the backdrop of James from the beginning (cf. Jas 1.2–4). James’s point is that all trials should be met with faith, defined as trust based on knowledge about God that leads us to unwavering steadfast obedience (cf. the prior discussion of 2.14–26). Thus, whatever the details of 5.14, James’s main concern is for spiritual faithfulness and growth. Even if we assume that physical illness is his only concern in verse 14, we should consider what he says in light of the idea of endurance in trials.

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But to emphasize the expectation of endurance does not mean we should minimize specific questions about 5.14, for, as McCartney reminds us, the verse is part of a text that "is remarkably full of difficult problems" (McCartney 2009, 251). The aim of this discussion is to introduce the issues; in a future installment, we'll consider a way forward toward resolving them.

The Wording of Verse 14

We begin by emphasizing the content and subjects of verse 14's commands. "Let him call" is the command given to the one who is sick, a translation of the imperative form of προσκαλέω (*proskaleō*). He is to call "the elders" who are in turn commanded to "pray over" (imperative form of προσεύχομαι, *proseuchomai*) the sick person, "anointing" him as they do so (aorist participle form of ἀλείφω, *aleiphō*). The elders are summoned because they are the "spiritual leaders … recognized for their maturity in the faith" (Moo 2000, 238).

That the elders are summoned to go to the sick person suggests "that the sickness is serious enough to restrict the mobility of the sufferer." James's use of the word *over* (ἐπί, *epi*) relative to the elders' prayer also suggests this conclusion. As Moo comments, "only here in biblical Greek does this combination occur, and it might picture the elders standing over the sick person." It's also possible to understand it as "shorthand for laying hands on the person during the praying (see Matt. 19:13)" (Moo 2000, 238).

Interpretation Options

Proposed interpretations for James's meaning can be grouped under two broad headings, each of which has two sub-headings: (1) a practical purpose, either (a) medicinal or (b) pastoral; (2) a religious purpose, either (a) sacramental or (b) symbolic. (For this discussion, I am utilizing the analysis in Moo 2000, 237–242. McCartney 2009, 253–254, is more detailed, enumerating ten possible meanings. For other helpful discussions of the text, see "For Additional Reading" below.)

In favor of the *practical, medicinal purpose* for the anointing is the fact that medicinal oil was used in the ancient world as a skin conditioner and a medicine (cf. Luke 10.34). It was said to be useful "in curing everything from toothache to paralysis" (per the second century physician, Galen; Moo 2000, 239). If James has this in mind when he refers to anointing, the elders were to go to "the bedside of the sick armed with both spiritual and natural resources" (Moo 2000, 239).

Proponents of the *pastoral purpose* view suggest that James intends the anointing "as an outward, physical expression of concern and as a means to stimulate the faith of the sick person." The anointing thus functions as a sort of "prop" (Moo 2000, 239). In this view, it functions to show spiritual concern or as a tangible indication of belief in the healing power of God.

Moo summarizes the origins of the view that the anointing has a *religious, sacramental purpose* as follows: "On the basis of this text the early Greek church practiced what they called *Euchelaion* (a combination of the words *euchē*, 'prayer,' and *elaion*, 'oil,' both used in this text), which had the purpose of strengthening the body and the soul of the sick" (Moo 2000, 239). The Western church continued the practice for centuries, also using oil on other occasions. Later, "the

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Roman church gave to the priest the exclusive right to perform this ceremony and developed the sacrament of extreme unction (in A. D. 852). This sacrament has the purpose of removing any remnant of sins and of strengthening the soul of the dying (healing is considered only a possibility)." Later, "the Council of Trent (14.1) found this sacrament 'insinuated' in Mark 6:13 and 'promulgated' in Jas. 5:14. Since Vatican II, the rite has been called 'the anointing of the sick'" (Moo 2000, 239).

The obvious problem with this interpretation is that "this developed sacrament has little basis in James's text: he recommends anointing for any illness and associates it with healing rather than preparation for death" (Moo 2000, 239). McCartney notes that this text was not associated with preparation for death until the Middle Ages and, in context, is not concerned with "imminent death" (McCartney 2009, 254). He also cites P. J. Hartin and R. E. Brown as "Roman Catholic scholars [who] have difficulty supporting the sacrament of extreme unction by way of James 5" (McCartney 2009, 253).

But with that said, it is conceivable that James intends the oil to be a means of "conveying" divine power, similar to the way "the partaking of the Lord's Supper conveys to the believing participants a strengthening in grace." Thus, the anointing "may be mandated by God as a physical element through which he works the grace of healing in the sick believer" (Moo 2000, 240). In that respect, the sacramental view is similar to the pastoral view noted above.

The other proposed *sacramental purpose* is the *symbolic* view. This is in line with frequent references to anointing for the purpose of consecrating people or things for God (cf. Exod 28.41; Luke 4.18 [= Isa 61.1]; Acts 4.27; 10.38; 2 Cor 1.21; Heb 1.9 [= Ps 45.7]). If this is James's intent, he is telling the elders to anoint the sick person to show that he is set apart for God's special attention.

In part 2, we'll seek to discern James's meaning and make some additional observations about its relevance now.

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For Additional Reading

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Hayden, Daniel R. 1981. "Calling the Elders to Pray." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138: 258–266. Hayden argues that "James is not referring to physical illness at all" (258).

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An Additional Thought on James

"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (Jas 1.17).

"This 'God the Father' [in James 1] may be pictured as the exalted family head and ruler of the universe, but he is also pictured as a generous and ungrudging (or noncritical) patron. So if one has single-minded commitment toward him, one goes to him and asks with confidence what is needed (see Jas 1:5 in context); the chief need in James's eyes is wisdom in the situation of testing. He will not complain about how one failed to use his generosity well last time, nor will he hold back like a miser, trying to keep 'his stuff' for his own use. He is a generous patron, which encourages one to approach him freely."

~ Peter H. Davids. 2014. *A Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*. Biblical Theology of the New Testament. ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger, ed. Zondervan, 72

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