Opening the Scriptures

Elders Anointing While They Pray, 2

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In part one, we noted specifics of the grammar of James 5.14 and briefly surveyed four proposals for interpreting the verse. Relative to the grammar, we saw that the verse includes two imperatives, the first a command to a sick person to call for the elders, and the second a command to the elders who are to pray over that sick person, anointing him (a participle) with oil as they do so. The interpretations were presented under two broad headings, each with two subheadings. (1) The anointing has a practical purpose, either (a) medicinal or (b) pastoral. (2) The purpose is religious, either (a) sacramental or (b) symbolic. We turn now to the question of James's meaning.

James's Choice of the Word for "Anoint"

James's choice of words for "anoint" may shed light on his intention. He does not use the word χρίω (*chriō*), found in Luke 4.18; Acts 4.27; 10.38; 2 Corinthians 1.21; and Hebrews 1.9, but rather ἀλείφω (*aleiphō*), also found in Matthew 6.17; Mark 6.13; 16.1; Luke 7.38, 46; John 11.2; and 12.3. *Aleiphō* is also used twenty times in the LXX (including one Second Temple Jewish writing), seven of which refer to rubbing whitewash on a wall (all seven of these are in Ezek 13.10–15; 22.28; cf. Gen 31.13; Exod 40.13; Num 3.3; Ruth 3.3; 2 Sam 12.20; 14.2; 2 Kings 4.2; 2 Chr 28.15; Esth 2.12; Judith 16.7; Mic 6.15; Dan. 10.3). In nine of those verses, *aleiphō* refers to rubbing oil on the face or body to beautify or cleanse (e.g., Ruth 4.3; 2 Sam 12.20; Esth 2.12). Four times, it has a ceremonial significance, three of which (in two verses) denote the sanctification of the priests for service to God (Exod 40.15; Num 3.3; cf. Gen 31.13).

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Moo finds it significant that "neither word is used with reference to medical purposes in the Septuagint." He notes that, following the pattern in the LXX, *chriō* in the NT is "always … a metaphor for consecration (Luke 4:18 [= Isa. 61:1]; Acts 4:27; 10:38; 2 Cor. 1:21; Heb. 1:9 [= Ps. 45:7])" (Moo 2000, 241). James's word, *aleiphō*, is also used elsewhere in the NT in the same way it is used in the LXX, "designating a cosmetic or hygienic anointing (Mark 6:17; Mark 16:1; Luke 7:38, 46 [twice]; John 11:2; 12:3)" (Moo 2000, 241). But, as Moo goes on to observe, "it is possible … that the word has some symbolic overtones in the account of Jesus' anointing (John 11:2; 12:3)" (Moo 2000, 241). [McCartney 2009, 253, sees the LXX evidence somewhat differently. He notes that *aleiphō* "normally means 'to rub,' and only occasionally is used in the Greek OT to refer to consecration (Exod 40:15; Num. 3:3)." He does acknowledge that "there are, nevertheless, a number of possible meanings to this anointing."]

How does this help us make sense of James 5.14? It would seem that *chriō* would have served James well had he intended only a symbolic significance, since it is typically used that way in biblical literature. On the other hand, *aleiphō* fits best if James intended to refer to an actual physical act of anointing. But bear in mind that neither word has medicinal significance in Scripture (unless it is found in Mark 6.13 and James 5.14; but to assert it in the latter text is to beg the question). [Luke 10.34 is not an exception. The verse does refer to medical treatment administered to the Samaritan in Jesus' parable, and Luke does use the word "oil" (ἔλαιον, *elaion*). But instead of "anointing," he uses "pouring" (ἐπιχέω, *epicheō*), not *chriō* or *aleiphō*.]

A Working Solution

We therefore posit that the typical use of "anointing" in biblical literature, whether *chriō* or *aleiphō*, points toward a symbolic meaning in James 5.14. We conclude this, in part, because of the weakness of the other views. First, as previously noted, the problems with the sacramental view are significant, encapsulated well by Blomberg and Kamell who comment, "the call from the sick person is not [to be made to] a priest (or any other solitary church leader), but to the elders who represent the entire local Christian community" (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 242).

The medicinal view also has difficulties. First, evidence is lacking that anointing with oil was ever used for any illness (Moo 2000, 241). Beyond that, why would James mention only one remedy when people would be facing different illnesses? Indeed, "oil is a treatment for wounds, not 'sickness'" (McCartney 2009, 254). Second, why call for the elders of the church if the purpose is solely medicinal? Surely, others would have already given medical attention to the sick person if that was necessary (Moo 2000, 241). In fact, the same Jewish tradition that uses the words for anointing also evidences great respect for physicians, as Sirach 38.1–4 (NRSV) illustrates:

> Honor physicians for their services,
> for the Lord created them;
> for their gift of healing comes from the Most High,
> and they are rewarded by the king.
> The skill of physicians makes them distinguished,
> and in the presence of the great they are admired.
> The Lord created medicines out of the earth,
> and the sensible will not despise them.

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Third, the fact that the anointing is to be administered "in the name of the Lord" makes it "clear that something other than simply the application of medicinal unguent is in view" (McCartney 2009, 254). Moo makes a comparable argument against the pastoral view, noting that, while it aligns with the consecration view, it does not fit with the idea of "the prayer of faith." In James, that expression has to do with the person praying or the fervency of the prayer, not with the idea that the anointing conveys faith into the sick person (Moo 2000, 241–242).

It is best, then, to see the anointing as a physical action with a symbolic significance. This aligns with the typical use of "anointing" in Scripture while also taking into account the physical action that is more often associated with *aleiphō*. In anointing the sick person as he prays, the elders symbolize that the person is being set apart for God's special attention and care.

Additional Observations

It is important to remember that the primary emphasis in James 5.14 is on prayer; whatever the anointing involves, it is secondary to that. We should also note the significance of the fact that the sick are told to summon the elders to pray over them. We need not think of this command in the way some call for a priest (or the *de facto* priest/clergyman) to appreciate the idea that James understands that there is an important reason for the sick to summon the community's elders, the spiritual leaders.

But when the elders arrive, must they actually anoint the sick person or is praying over him sufficient? Calvin, Luther, and others argued that the anointing was limited to the apostolic age. Moo rejects that view, arguing that if the point of the command is to set apart the sick person for God's attention—and to reinforce that idea in the sick person's mind—there is no reason for such a restriction. But he also cautions, "the fact that anointing a sick person is mentioned only here in the NT epistles, and that many healings were accomplished without anointing, shows that the practice is not a necessary accompaniment to the prayer for healing" (Moo 2000, 242).

We suggest that we have here a case in which the main thing is intended to be continued, but the specific manner need not be. In other words, calling for the elders to pray over a sick person, especially in cases where that person is an invalid (even for a short term), should still occur. Whether or not one anoints with oil while engaged in that prayer is, in our view, a matter of judgment.

Conclusion

So, the practice of summoning elders to pray over a sick person should continue. But not for the sake of form. As James's subsequent example of Elijah will underscore (Jas 5.17–18), the point is for the church's leaders to actively embrace the power of petitionary prayer. As Richard Bauckham has observed, this is especially important in our modern technologically advanced age that "has promoted a sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency to which prayer is alien" and instead "has encouraged the sense that all problems have human solutions … [that are] realizable by human means" (Bauckham 1999, 207).

As God's people, we are called to a different faith.

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An Additional Thought on James

"James follows Jesus in locating the heart of the law in the twin commands to love God and neighbor (cf. Gal. 5:14). James also emphasizes—as did Jesus—the singular importance of congruity between profession of one's faith in God and expression of love for one's neighbor, with an emphasis on the expression of that love in the merciful, charitable, and humble stance one takes with respect to others. In fact, it can easily be argued that the links between the ethic of James and the teaching of Jesus are as strong as, if not stronger than, those between any other document of the NT and the traditions of Jesus."

~ Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson. 2001. *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 503

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