OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Worthless Faith: A Word Study

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We'll conclude our study of James with a look at three words in the letter that are also significant in other NT texts. The first is μάταιος (*mataios*), which appears in James's statement about genuine religion: "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is *worthless*" ("futile, NET; 1.26). We'll review and expand on a previous study of the term (Issue 1/19, Mar. 12, 2024).

Mataios: Meaning and Jewish Background

According to Bauer, *mataios*, which appears six times in the NT, "per[tains] to being of no use, *idle, empty, fruitless, useless, powerless, lacking truth*" (Bauer 2000, 621). Balz adds that, as used in biblical literature, it often refers "to a senseless understanding of reality in contrast to the only valid reality of God." He also notes that it is at times a synonym for "sin," "breath of wind," "nothingness," "illusion," "futility," and "lies" (Balz 1991, 396). In the LXX, it is often used to translate the Hebrew word הֶבֶל (*hēbel*), the most concentrated use of which is in Ecclesiastes (38 times). There, it is translated "vanity," "meaningless" (NIV), or "futility" (NASB), and describes the result of pursuing life "under the sun" (28 times in the ESV) or "under heaven" (3 times in ESV), that is, a life that does not actively involve God.

Mataios is also used in all sections of the LXX as a descriptor of Israel's idolatry. This includes the third commandment's prohibition of the *vain* use of the LORD's name (the Hebrew word is שׁוא, *šuʾ*), a natural progression from the prohibition of idolatry in the first two commandments

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(Exod 20.7; Deut 5.11). It is used with reference to the idolatry of Jeroboam I (2 Chron 11.15), those who followed the course he charted (cf. 1 Kings 16.2, 13, 26), and in the explanation for the captivity in 2 Kings 17.6–23. It also appears in Psalm 24, where David says that one who seeks to "ascend the hill of the LORD" must "not lift up his soul to what is *false*" (NIV: "who does not trust in an *idol*") (vv. 3–4), and in several prophetic denunciations of idolatry, both pre- and post-exilic (e.g., Hos 5.11; 12.1; Amos 2.4; Isa 1.13; 44.9; Jer 2.15; 8.19; Mic 1.14; Ezek 13.7–9; 22.28; Zech 10.2). The word is also used in several writings in the Second Temple period (e.g., Wisd 13.1; 15.8; Sir 34.5; 3 Macc 6.11; Aristeas 136, 139).

Mataios in the NT

In each of its six NT appearances (other forms and compounds of the word appear another eight times), *mataios* describes the opposite of the writers' appeal to be exclusively focused on God as the priority in both word and deed (cf. Matt 6.24). To reflect first on its use in James, it is hard to imagine that Judaism's use of the word to describe idolatry did not color his thinking in 1.26. Adding to this impression is the fact that he later refers to his readers as "adulteresses" (Jas 4.4 NASB; the feminine μοιχαλίδες, *moichalides*) in the sense of the prophetic epithet directed at idolatrous Israel and Judah. James understood that a "religion" that minimizes moral living and active assistance for those for whom God especially cares (cf. Ps 10) is just as empty as Israel's idolatry, the practice of which also often included a neglect of society's outcasts (cf. Isa 1.10–18; Jer 7.3–4; Amos 2.6–8; 5.21–24; Mic 6.6–8).

In Acts 14, *mataios* refers to the idolatry of the people of Lystra. Upon hearing the preaching of Barnabas and Paul, they took them to be the "gods" Zeus and Hermes, who "have come down to us in the likeness of men!" (vv. 11–12). When Barnabas and Paul learned the people were about to offer a sacrifice to them, "they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, 'Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these *vain* [*mataios*] things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them'" (vv. 14–15).

Peter's use of *mataios* implicitly references the idolatry theme. In a paragraph beginning in 1 Peter 1.13, he reminds his readers of their calling as Jesus' followers in contrast with what they had left behind. It was a calling that required them to prepare their minds and be self-controlled, necessary actions for embracing the hope they had received at the revelation of Jesus Christ (v. 13). It was also a call to obey Jesus instead of conforming to the desires they had pursued in their former lives, an appeal to consistently seek the ideal of imitating the divine example of qualitative holiness (vv. 14–16). Necessary for completion of that goal was remembering the Father's impartial judgment on the one hand and their empty way of life before they surrendered to the resurrected Christ on the other (vv. 17–21). The word "futile," or "empty" (NIV), in verse 18 is *mataios*, the use of which evokes the inherited practice of pursuing false gods and the dissolute lifestyle that resulted (cf. 1 Pet 4.1–3).

Paul uses *mataios* twice in 1 Corinthians, in passages that underscore the emptiness of lives spent in pursuit of lesser, temporary things. In 3.20, the word appears in the culmination of his exposure of the Corinthians' love for and pursuit of human wisdom begun in 1.18, a pursuit that re-

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flected the influence of their polytheistic Greek background (cf. 1.17, 19–22, 24–27, 30; 2.1, 4–7, 13; 3.18–20). Quoting Job 5.13 and Psalm 94.11, he reminded them that "the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, 'He catches the wise in their craftiness,' and again, 'The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are *futile* [*mataios*]'" (1 Cor 3.19–20; *mataios* is translated "breath" in Ps 94.11, rendering the Hebrew word *hēbel*).

In 1 Corinthians 15.17, "futile" (*mataios*) describes the nature of faith if Christ has not been raised; as verse 19 elaborates, if he offers hope only in this life, we Christians are to be pitied for wasting our lives. As in the earlier passage, the Corinthians' background in Greek thought is significant: many Greeks had a view of the afterlife which led them to find the idea of a bodily resurrection incomprehensible (cf. vv. 35–41). But if Christ was not really raised, their commitment and the purported benefits of his way are meaningless.

Titus 3.9, the final NT text where *mataios* appears, presents us with a different slant on worthless faith: "But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and *worthless* [*mataios*]." An overview of 3.1–11 is necessary to appreciate Paul's use of the word here. In verses 1–3, he instructs Titus to tell the Cretan believers (cf. 1.5) to remember and renew their commitment to live in a way that was commensurate with their conversion. Verses 4–7 remind them why they could be confident about their course: because of God's goodness and loving kindness, given by grace, they had been saved, regenerated, and renewed; thus they could be confident they would "become heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (v. 7). Verses 8, 10–11 highlight the contrast between two different practices of the life of faith. Those who will meet God's approval will "be intent on engaging in good works" which are "good and beneficial for all people" (v. 8 NET). But those who are divisive will be rejected, self-condemned by practices that show they are "warped and sinful" (vv. 10–11).

Against the backdrop of the repeated use of *mataios* to refer to a way of life that proves meaningless because it is grounded on false foundations, Paul's use of the term in Titus 3.9 is noteworthy. While we cannot say that "foolish controversies," (preoccupation with) "genealogies," "dissensions," and "quarrels about the law" are idolatrous in themselves—the people under consideration in Titus 3 were professed believers after all—we are on safe ground in saying that the religion they practice is ultimately just as meaningless. In other words, if the behaviors described are not idolatrous per se, they are in the same family. In the words of James, people who practice them are more friends of the world than friends of God (Jas 4.4).

That is not a circumstance disciples should take lightly.

Works Cited

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An Additional Thought on James

"'Letters, Lord? Oh, yeah—sure, got every one of them. As a matter of fact, Lord, we have had *letter study* every Friday night. We have even divided all the congregation into small groups and discussed many of the things you wrote. Some of the things were really interesting. You'll be pleased to know that a few of us have actually committed to memory some of your sentences and paragraphs. One or two memorized an entire letter or two! Great stuff in those letters!'

"'Okay, you got my letters, you studied them and meditated on them, discussed and even memorized them. BUT WHAT DID YOU DO ABOUT THEM?'"

~ R. Kent Hughes. 1991. *James: Faith that Works*. Crossway Books, 77

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