



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Background: Deciding for God (2) The Theology of James

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Why did James write his letter? Unlike Paul's declaration in Romans 1.16-17, there is no statement we can identify as a thesis. At first blush, we get the sense that the letter is simply a collected series of meditations (or homilies) on various subjects in response to his readers' life experiences and behavior. In chapter 1, for example, we can identify twelve topics on which he quickly comments: trials (vv. 2-4, 12); prayer (v. 5); wisdom (v. 5); double-mindedness (vv. 6-8); the issue of rich versus poor (vv. 9-11); temptation (vv. 13-15); God as the giver of good gifts (vv. 16-18); anger (vv. 19-20); speech (v. 19); meekness (v. 21); doing the word (vv. 22-25); and true religion (vv. 26-27).

Although the respective sections are longer, his method is the same in chapters 2-5 where we can again identify twelve topics: discrimination (2.1-13); faith and works (2.14-26); speech (3.1-12); true and false wisdom (3.13-18); strife and double-mindedness (4.1-10); condemnation of judging (4.11-12); denunciation of arrogant traders (4.13-17); condemnation of rich and oppressive landowners (5.1-6); exhortation to patience until the Lord comes (5.7-11); a warning against oaths (5.12); the value and importance of prayer (5.13-18); and an exhortation to restore the wandering (5.19-20).

His moves from subject to subject have led some to conclude that James is structureless; while I disagree with that conclusion, I do think the structure he employs is different from what we are accustomed to in modern western writings. But if there is a structure, what theme does James use it to emphasize? The same variety of topics that leads some to see the letter as structureless is also a principal reason various students of James have proposed different primary themes. Two of the notable suggestions are wisdom (1.5; 3.13, 15, 17) and trials (1.2, 12-14). (Notice that trials are evident throughout the letter, not just in the sections that use the words “trials” and “tempt”—1.2-4, 12-14; e.g., the oppression of the rich was a trial for the poor, it was a trial for those who had to endure quarrels and fights, etc.)

In contrast to these suggestions, I submit that trials and the exhortations to wisdom are related to the *circumstances* of the letter’s recipients, not its main theme. I also propose that James’s theme is identifiable as the overarching exhortation to the readers to learn and employ wisdom to resolve their trials and deal effectively with other circumstances, including those brought about by their failures. Thus, as introduced in part 1, I suggest the following summary statement of James’s big idea.

- Writing to *believers under duress*,
- James urges *a response of decisive commitment to unwavering faith* that
- recalls *the giving nature of the creative, covenantal, and providential God* who gives the wisdom we need to manage the challenges of life.

Applied Theology

Notice that James refers explicitly to God nearly 30 times: θεός (*theos*) appears sixteen times (1.1, 5, 13, 20, 27; 2.5, 19, 23; 3.9; 4.4, 6-8); “Father” (πατήρ; *patēr*) is used three times to refer to God (1.17, 27; 3.9); and “Lord” (κύριος; *kyrios*) is used eight times to definitively refer to God (1.7; 3.9; 4.10, 15; 5.4, 10-11). Two other ambiguous uses of *kyrios* probably refer to the Father but could refer to the Son (5.14-15). (*kyrios* is used four times unambiguously of the Son, in 1.1; 2.1; 5.7-8.)

By applying different aspects of God’s nature to his readers’ circumstances, James uses traits of God’s character to motivate them to practice unwavering allegiance that will be evidenced in uncompromising behavioral standards. Thus, he stresses that God is uniquely one (2.19); he is pure, neither corrupt nor corruptible (1.13ff.); he is unchanging, never fickle or vacillating (1.16-17; cf. 1.5-8; 4.8); he is concerned for the less fortunate who are often neglected (1.26-27; 2.1-7; 5.1-11); he is the source of all that’s good and right, revealing the correct wisdom by which to live (3.13-18); and he is uncompromising—we are either his friends or his enemies, loyal to him or spiritually adulterous (2.23; 4.4).

In short, James *is* a theological writing, but it is not a *systematic theology*, a sequential and topical discussion of God. Instead, it is an *applied theology*, relating the traits of God's nature to the practical matters at hand. In writing this way, James demonstrates his awareness of the understanding of God that was prominent in his Jewish heritage. We appreciate this more when we take note of the essence of Jewish monotheism, as summarized by C. C. Newman:

Israel openly asserted that this one God made the world and everything in it, that this one God had elected a people, and that this one God providentially cared for them. That Yahweh had decisively and consistently acted on their behalf in the past emboldened Jews, even in the face of a historical crisis like the exile, to envision a new and better day. Jewish monotheism can be characterized as *creational* (it was Yahweh who created the world), *covenantal* (it was Yahweh who had given the promises), and *providential* (it was Yahweh who was directing the course of history), an exclusive monotheism that forged a dogged eschatological hope (Newman 1997, 413; my emphasis).

When we read his letter with this traditional Jewish understanding in mind, we begin to see how James applies it to his readers' circumstances, expecting them to respond with complete allegiance to God with whom they are in covenant, remaining hopeful that he will deliver and reward them (cf. 5.7-11).

I'll limit discussion to illustrate this point to examples found in chapter 1. In 1.2-8, James acknowledges that trials will happen, but stresses that they are helpful for producing stronger faith. He also emphasizes that we cannot handle them alone, and so should ask for the wisdom that comes from God whose nature is to give it without reservation to all who respond with single-minded commitment (vv. 5-8). Similarly, in 1.12, he says that, when we remain steadfast as we experience life's inevitable trials, God will keep his *promise* and give us the victory crown. We count on him to do this because God the *creator* never does evil. Additionally, as we see in 1.16-18, as our Father, God always *provides* good gifts, is always consistent, and brings us into new life as surely as he created the old.

In view of this emphasis, it is perfectly sensible that James would sum up his appeal to faithful living with a call to "submit therefore to *God* ... draw near to *God* ... [and] humble yourselves before the *Lord*, and *he* will exalt you" (Jas 4.7-8, 10).

Works Cited

C. C. Newman (1997). "God." *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*. Ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.

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