



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

The Structure of James

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I enjoy and follow some of our nation's major sports, but typically watch very little, if any, of the pre-game shows for their championship events. Because I keep up with them as their seasons progress, I don't feel the need to watch the extended programming to gain the perspective the productions purport to give; my sustained interest equips me with the essential context I need to knowledgably watch the big games.

Of course, sports programming is not unique in producing pre-event content to provide context. Before viewing a play, we can read a synopsis of its story in the printed program. Or we read or watch news reports before watching a major political speech. We understand that we can make more sense of an activity or event if we have a prior understanding of its setting.

We need perspective and context for effective Bible study, too. We get more from a book's themes, arguments, and paragraphs if we have an idea of the document's setting and what the author is trying to accomplish. Just reading all the way through a book before we begin to study its parts will help us to better understand many of its details.

Which brings me to James. Students of his letter have long noted how James moves from subject to subject, and often returns to subjects he has already addressed, in what appears to many to be a

random way. Did he have an aim? Was he developing a thesis? Is more going on in the letter than first appears?

Those who contend the letter is more random and essentially structureless find evidence for their conclusion in the way James quickly touches on 12 different subjects in chapter 1 and in the 12 different topics he treats more extensively in chapters 2-5 (see my previous listing of those topics [here](#)). They also take note of his topic repetition, sometimes with different vocabulary the second time; how he moves abruptly from one theme to another; and how he employs proverbial statements and link-words to connect different units (see Davids 1982, 22-23). This variety of subject and approach is why some students of the book find it difficult, if not impossible, to outline. As Richard Bauckham summarizes it, some have concluded that James is only “a ‘storehouse’ into which all kinds of diverse material have been gathered, so that readers can help themselves to whatever might be useful to them for their own purposes” (Bauckham 1999, 61; “storehouse” cited from Dibelius and Greeven 1975, 11).

I understand why they think that. But I’m among those who are convinced that James is not the random collection of sayings some allege it to be. I’m also persuaded that we must let James define his structure, not impose one on him. We must remember that James is not a modern citizen of the West composing the kind of writing so familiar to us in which arguments are set forth step-by-step in a linear fashion. Nor should we treat James’s letter as if it was one of Paul’s, who, as he wrote to churches largely populated by Greco-Roman citizens, also tended to argue in a more linear way (see McCartney 2009, 62).

Do you remember the movie, *Karate Kid*? Young Daniel wants to learn karate, but is frustrated when his teacher, Mr. Miyagi, makes him wash and wax his car. Miyagi tells him to “wax on” with the right hand and “wax off” with the left and to be sure he breathes regularly, in through the nose and out through the mouth. If you remember the movie, you know that, even though Daniel doesn’t see it then, in requiring him to wash his car Mr. Miyagi is already teaching him about karate; the muscle memory he needed to wax on and wax off was the same he would need for basic karate moves. Miyagi’s training structure was not what Daniel expected, or what others employed. But it was a *different* structure, not an *absence* of structure.

What if James was doing something similar? What if, instead of composing a linear argument, after the manner of ancient Greco-Roman authors or modern writers in the West, James wrote like a first century Galilean Jew? What if his structure was like that of other Jewish writers of the time who, when they wrote to diaspora Jews, composed a series of instructions for preserving faithfulness to Jewish ways in an antagonistic culture? (See McCartney 2000, 58-67; esp. 62-

63.)¹ Once we take James’s cultural background into account, we begin to see that he utilized a structure in which he cyclically touched on different subjects to illustrate a singular theme.²

We are now ready to examine the individual parts of the letter to ascertain what that theme is and how he developed it.

Works Cited

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¹ See also Davids 1982, 24-26, who draws on the findings of F. O. Francis that James is similar in structure and approach to other Hellenistic and Jewish writings of the time, in particular the New Testament letter, 1 John.

² Both McCartney 2000, 62-63, and Bauckham 1999, 72 call attention to James’s chiasmic structure, particularly in the development of chapters 2-5, as well as his use of “markers” such as the repetitive use of “brothers” (15 times) throughout the letter and the various proverbial sayings he employs along the way.

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