



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Who's To Blame?

David Anguish

During the decade-plus I taught in a Christian secondary school, a few students ventured to suggest—without success—that if I had not given the test, they could not have failed it. Others had a different complaint. They thought they were being treated unfairly because some questions were intended to trick them into giving a wrong answer. In fairness, some of the questions they expressed concern about were worded poorly; in those exceptional cases, I remedied the problem by discarding the ambiguous question and adding the points to their score.

When we read James 1.13-18, we might wonder if some of James's readers were having similar thoughts about their moral failures. He told them that to build their endurance with the goal of being complete and perfect, they should meet their trials with joy (vv. 2-4). He assured them that if they remained steadfast through their trials, they would be “blessed” and “receive the crown of life” God had promised (v. 12). And if they discovered they lacked what they needed to cope with their trials, he told them to ask God for wisdom. But, he warned, they were to ask, and live, with an unwavering trust and commitment to the way of faith (vv. 5-8).

But what if they persevered and still failed? In verses 13-18, James acknowledges that failure is possible. Some give in to temptation and commit sins which can lead to death (vv. 14-15). Their tests create pressure to fail that they do not overcome. Is that fair? If God really wants his people to receive the crown of life, can't he just bless them without their having to experience troubles

that could lead them to sin and forfeiture of life? And what if trials are really God’s “trick questions” designed to make people fail?

Trials and Temptations

As we think about these questions, we first need to see that the English words “trial” (vv. 2, 12) and “tempt” (vv. 13-14) translate different forms of the same Greek word: the noun *πειρασμός* (*peirasmos*) and verb *πειράζω* (*peirazō*). In some contexts, it means “to test,” but in others, it has the more sinister meaning of “tempt,” an enticement to do wrong. (The same was once true of the English word “tempt,” but the meaning, “to test” has become obsolete. See “tempt,” Merriam-Webster.)

This dual usage has precedence in James’s Jewish heritage. In cases such as those involving Abraham (Gen 22.1), Israel (Judg 2.22), and Hezekiah (2 Chron 32.31), the Old Testament affirms that God did at times test his people; the LXX uses *peirazō* in each of those texts. We also have examples of people blaming God when they sinned, beginning with Adam who, when confronted about having eaten from the tree God had declared off limits, said, “*The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate*” (Gen 3.12). Nearer the time of James, we find evidence that others were also inclined to blame God for their failures. In a passage similar to James from the second-century BC book of Sirach, the writer warns, “Do not say, ‘It was the Lord’s doing that I fell away’; for he does not do what he hates. Do not say, ‘It was he who led me astray’; for he has no need of the sinful” (Sirach 15.11-12 NRSV).

Is It God’s Fault?

Is God to blame for the temptation that entices to sin which leads to death? James emphatically rejects that premise. Verse 13 begins with the imperative, “Let not the one being tempted say, ‘From God I am being tempted.’” That “tempt” is the correct meaning of *peirazō* here is clear from the following clause that says, “God cannot be tempted (*peirazō*) with *evil*” and the subsequent allusions to sin and death in verse 15.

James gives two reasons why it is wrong to say God is tempting us. First, it is incompatible with God’s nature: “God cannot be tempted with evil” (v. 13). James’s words are reminiscent of Habakkuk’s affirmation that God is “of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong” (Hab 1.13). Second, because of his nature, God will not participate in evil. “And he himself tempts no one” (v. 13).

In fact, God’s nature is altogether good and thus he only gives good gifts. Using synonymous terms—probably for emphasis—James assures his readers that, “Every good and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (v. 17). Describing God’s gifts as

both “good” (ἀγαθός; *agathos*) and “perfect” (τέλειος; *teleios*) recalls his prior reference to the perfection that results from steadfastness (vv. 4-5). The present tense participle, “coming down” (καταβαῖνον, *katabainon*) accentuates God’s consistent lavishing of gifts on his people. Designating him as the “Father of lights” reminds us that this is the God who brought those heavenly lights into existence. But, in contrast to the varying positions and shadows of those lights, God is unwavering, consistent in being and doing good.¹

But James does not stop there. Just because he willed to do so (“of his own will” translates the aorist participle βουληθεῖς, *boulētheis*), God “brought us forth” (aorist tense, from ἀποκυέω; *apokueō*) to be “a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.” The repetition of *apokueō* from verse 15 where it refers to desire “giving birth” to sin, emphasizes the contrast between the evil inherent in tempting with the goal of enticing to sin on the one hand and the good which inheres in and flows from God on the other.

The reference to “firstfruits” (ἀπαρχή; *aparchē*) recalls the Old Testament background of “the firstfruit of people, animals, and plants, which belonged to God and were either redeemed or offered to him (Ex. 22:29-30; Nu. 18:8-12; Dt. 18:3; 26:2, 10; Lv. 27:26; Ezk. 20:40; cf. Greek parallels: Homer *Od.* 14.446; Hdt. 1.92; Thuc. *Hist.* 3.58)” (Davids 1982, 90) (see also Lev 23.10-11). The word was also used to refer to the idea of the promise of a full harvest to come (see other NT uses of *aparchē* in Rom 16.5; 1 Cor 15.20; 16.15; Rev 14.4; 2 Thess 2.13). This outcome, James says, is the result of our response to “the word of truth,” the means by which God “brought us forth.”

Conclusion

So, is God to blame for the temptation that entices us to commit sin which results in death? No, James answers, for God is completely good and wills nothing but good for everyone, especially for those who maintain unwavering steadfast faith in him. Why then do some fail to meet the test and surrender to temptation? We’ll look more closely at James’s answer to that question next time.

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¹ The phrase, “no variation or shadow due to change” (v. 17) is challenging and has been much discussed. But the point is clear that James intends to affirm God’s unwavering nature. The key words (παραλλαγή, τροπή, ἀποσκίασμα; *parallagē, tropēs, aposkiasma*) can be illustrated by the changing shadows on the moon or the moving shadow of a sundial. See McCartney 2009, 112; see also Bauer 2000, 1016, on τροπή; *tropē*, the process of turning.

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