



# OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

## Worthless Religion — Jewish Context

David Anguish

I have [previously](#) affirmed that the epistle of James is a theological writing. By this, I do not mean that it is a *systematic theology*, a sequential and topical discussion of God, but rather an *applied theology*, relating God's traits and deeds to the practical matters James addresses in his letter. James applies the understanding of the monotheistic God that was prominent in his Jewish heritage, summarized by C. C. Newman as follows:

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).

To demonstrate steadfast faith in this creational, covenantal, and providential God, James calls on his readers to demonstrate friendship with God, not the world (Jas 4.4). To do so requires humility, submitting and drawing near to God, and resistance to the devil and the earthly, unspiritual wisdom he promulgates (Jas 3.13 – 4.8).

The Judaism of James's day, informed by teaching and examples in the Old Testament text, understood the necessity of rejecting vain views of and approaches to God, an outlook and life-commitment summarized by the term *idolatry*. His reference to “adulteresses” (feminine μοιχαλίδες, *moichalides*; NASB, ESV note) in James 4.4 recalls the language of the prophets who used that metaphor to refer to the apostasy of Israel and Judah before their respective falls (Jer 3.8–9; 5.7; 7.9; 9.2; 13.27; 23.10, 14; 29.23; Ezek 16.32, 38; 23.37, 43, 45; Hos 2.2; 3.1; 4.2, 13–14; 7.4).

James's use of the word *worthless* (μάταιος, *mataios*) in 1.26 also echoes the Old Testament's emphasis on the elevation of lesser things to a place alongside or above God. Study of its use in the LXX, extra-canonical writings, and other New Testament texts illuminates James's reference to worthless religion.

### “Worthless” Defined and Illustrated

According to Bauer (2000, 621), *mataios* “per[tains] to being of no use, *idle, empty, fruitless, useless, powerless, lacking truth*.” Balz notes that in biblical literature, the word often refers “to a senseless understanding of reality in contrast to the only valid reality of God” and is used as a synonym for “sin,” “breath of wind,” “nothingness,” “illusion,” “futility,” “lies,” etc. (Balz 1991, 396). The most concentrated use of the word is in Ecclesiastes where it appears 39 times in the LXX to translate the Hebrew הֶבֶל (*hebel*), which appears 38 times in the text. It is the word translated *vanity, meaningless* (NIV), or *futility* (NASB), the consequence of pursuing life “under the sun” (28 times in ESV) or “under heaven” (3 times in ESV) (e.g., Eccl 1.2, 14).

*Mataios* is used in all parts of the LXX to refer to the idolatry that plagued Israel throughout its history. It appears in the third commandment's prohibition of *vain* use of the LORD'S name, a natural progression from the prohibition of idolatry in the first two commands (Exod 20.7; Deut 5.11). It is used in references to the practice of Jeroboam I (2 Chron 11.15) and those who followed the course he charted, including Baasha (1 Kings 16.2, 13), Elah (16.13), and Omri, father of Ahab (16.26). It is used in Psalm 24.4 in the question about who can ascend the hill of the LORD and stand in his holy place: the answer is, he “who does not lift up his soul to what is *false*” (“who does not trust in an *idol*” – NIV). It is used in prophetic denunciations of idolatry in Israel (Hos 5.11; 12.1; Amos 2.4), Judah (Isa 1.13; 44.9; Mic 1.14), and as the people returned from exile (Zech 10.2).

Notice especially its occurrences in Jeremiah (2.15; 8.19; 10.3, 15; 28.18 [LXX 51.18] and Ezekiel (8.10; 11.2; 13.7–9, 19; 21.29 [LXX 21.34]; 22.28). Both are concerned with Judah around the time of the nation's fall and captivity. Both make repeated use of adultery as a metaphor for the nation's covenant disloyalty. Use of *mataios* by these two prophets is of particular interest in light of the word's appearance in the description and explanation of the captivity in 2 Kings

17.6–23, notably verse 15 where two forms of *mataios* appear; the NET translates the last part of the verse, “They paid allegiance to *worthless idols*, and so became *worthless* to the Lord.” (See also the following references in writings included in the LXX and Apocrypha [NRSV]: Wisd 15.8; 3 Macc 6.11; for a broader, but related use, see Wisd 13.1; Sir 34.5; 3 Macc 6.11; 4 Macc 16.7; cf. these references in the Pseudepigrapha [trans. Craig Evans]: Sibyl 5.83; Aristeas 136, 139; for a broader but related use, see Sibyl 3.547.)

The New Testament’s use of *mataios* is also enlightening. Besides James 1.26, the noun appears five other times. Two are in contexts calling pagans to abandon idolatry (Acts 14.15) or reminding believers of the futile ways they had left behind (1 Pet 1.18). Two are in 1 Corinthians, in contexts that warn against following futile ways based on human wisdom, the essence of idolatry (1 Cor 3.20 [quoting Ps 94.11]; 15.17). The other reference is in Titus 3.9, where Paul tells his readers to avoid “foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and *worthless*.” Idolatry is not explicitly mentioned in the Titus context, but the text is concerned with practices and outcomes that ultimately lead to the same futile end (cf. 3.1–11). (The related noun *ματαιότης* [*mataiotēs*] appears in Rom 8.20; Eph 4.17; 2 Pet 2.18. The verb *ματαιώω* [*mataioō*] appears in Rom 1.21.)

## Worthless Religion in James

As we think about James’s treatment of “worthless religion” (1.26) against this backdrop, it’s important to keep in mind that throughout his letter, he shows that his thinking had been completely immersed in Scripture; he “thought Bible.” Thus, it is hard to imagine that he could have used *mataios* without awareness of Judaism’s use of the word to refer to living for the wrong god and/or priorities. Think in particular of the connection the prophets made between idolatry and immorality and of Israel’s failure to practice justice for the orphans, widows, and poor even as they also worshiped idols (from Isa 1.10–17, note LXX 1.13 and 2.20 where *mataios* appears; cf. Amos 2.4. 6–8;).

Two ideas are important for our consideration. First, a religion that treats lightly moral living and active care for those for whom God especially cares (cf. Ps 10.2, 8, 10–14, 18) is as vain as Israel’s idolatry, no matter how frequent and fervent our gatherings (cf. Jer 7.3–4; Mic 6.6–8). Second, the way to guard against worthless religion is to keep our focus on *God*, especially his work in creation, covenant, and providence.

To do that, we must be purposeful in deepening our knowledge of God in the practice of a *worthwhile religion* so that:

- We are completely devoted to him.
- We are committed to being his friend, not the world’s.

- We are pursuing that friendship by humility and submission.
- We are so devoted to that submission that we come to know what matters most to him and consistently demonstrate our awareness by our attitudes and behaviors.
- We come to value those whom he values and treat them the way he does.

## Works Cited

- Horst Balz. 1991. “μάταιος.” *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*. ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider. Vol. 2. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Walter Bauer. 2000. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. ed. Frederick W. Danker. 3rd ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Craig A. Evans, trans. 2009. *The Pseudepigrapha (English)*. Assisted by Danny Zacharias, Matt Walsh, and Scott Kohler. Acadia Divinity College, Wolfville, Nova Scotia, Canada. Oak-Tree Software, Inc.
- C. C. Newman. 1997. “God.” *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Development*. Ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

---

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV

(All emphasis in Bible quotations added by the author)

Permission is granted to reprint original materials with the credit line,

“Reprinted from David Anguish, ‘Opening the Scriptures,’ March 12, 2024”

Feedback is welcome. Direct comments to [david@davidanguish.com](mailto:david@davidanguish.com)

To receive each new issue of this newsletter in your inbox, click [here](#).