



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Partiality in the Assembly

David Anguish

At first glance, James 2, which addresses just two topics, appears very different from chapter 1 which in its 27 verses mentions no fewer than ten. But a closer look reveals that chapter 2 is continuing James's elaboration of the central theme of chapter 1: what does the steadfast faith of people committed to friendship with God (cf. 4.4) look like in real life?

Building on his definition of authentic religion in 1.26–27, James continues to apply his exhortation to his readers to be doers of the word (1.19–25) by controlling their tongues, demonstrating God-imitating esteem for the marginalized, and remaining unstained from the world. In broad terms, he develops those ideas with specific application in the succeeding sections with calls to: (a) value people as God values them (as a display of genuine faith) (2.1–26); (b) control the tongue (3.1–12); (c) remain unstained from the world (3.13 – 4.12).

The Sin of Partiality (2.1)

He begins with a case study within the larger principle of loving one's neighbor. The conditional argument (ἐάν, *ean*; "if") and subjunctive mood of the main verbs in verses 2–3 ("comes" [twice], "pay attention," and "say") suggest that James is using a hypothetical situation to illustrate his point. But "the actions are unfortunately realistic enough that they most likely resemble events that have taken place in James's churches" (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 107). His point is

the same either way: “My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory” (v. 1).

“Partiality” (προσωποληψία, *prosōpolēpsia*), “literally ‘to accept a face’” (Louw & Nida 1989, 768), appears twice in the passage. Verse 1 prohibits it; verse 9 describes it: to show partiality is, literally, to “work sin” (ἀμαρτίαν ἐργάζεσθε; *hamartian ergazesthe*). James’s negative reference to a work in verse 9 is in contrast to his positive emphasis elsewhere (1.4, 20, 25; 2.14, 17–18, 20–22, 24–26; 3.13; cf. the verb “do” and noun “doer” in 1.22–23, 25; 2.8, 12–13; 4.11).

“To receive/accept the face” is to make judgments or distinctions based on externals, such as physical appearance, socio-economic standing, or race. *Prosōpolēpsia* does not appear in either secular Greek or the LXX and “is apparently a creation of the early Christian parenetic tradition to translate the common Hebrew terms for favor/favoritism, *nāsā’ pānīm* (LXX πρόσωπον λαμβάνειν or θαυμάζειν πρόσωπον)” (Davids 1982, 105). The idea is used both positively (1 Sam 25.35; Mal 1.8) and negatively, the latter especially in judicial contexts which stress that since God does not show partiality, neither should human judges. Leviticus 19.15 and Deuteronomy 10.17–18 are representative:

You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor (Lev 19.15).

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing (Deut 10.17–18).

James 2.2 says that partiality is out of step with profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is consistent with the other uses of *prosōpolēpsia* in the New Testament where the word refers to God who, it is emphasized, is *not* partial (Rom 2.11; Eph 6.9; Col 3.25).

Using multiple terms that together emphasize Jesus’s unique nature and authority, James says that showing partiality is the opposite of faith in “our Lord Jesus Christ, the [one] of glory” (literally translated). He is the Messiah (χριστός, *christos*) promised to Israel; he is the Lord (κύριος, *kyrios*), given the supreme position at the Father’s right hand and the one who will bring God’s enemies into submission (cf. Ps 110.1; note that *kyrios* is used over 1,600 times in the LXX to translate YHWH; Wright 2006, 108).

He is also “the [one] of glory” (τῆς δόξης, *tēs doxēs*). Grammatically and textually, this phrase can be interpreted in different ways. (1) It could modify “the faith,” and mean either “the glorious faith” or “faith in the glory of.” But this gives more emphasis to the term *glory* than is warranted; James’s emphasis is on the person of Jesus. (2) It could be intended to modify “Lord,” and would thus mean “faith in our Lord of glory Jesus Christ.” But this is awkward. (3) “The glory” could be used in apposition to Jesus Christ, yielding the meaning, “our Lord Jesus Christ,

the Glory.” If so, this would be the only such reference to Jesus in this historical period. (4) “The one of glory” could be intended to modify the entirety of the phrase “our Lord Jesus Christ.” This is the sense in the ESV, but is better expressed in the translation, “our glorious Lord Jesus Christ” (NRSV, NIV). This is the better interpretation, fitting James’s intent to exalt Christ. It also harmonizes with the usual use of “glory” in the Old Testament as “the luminous manifestation of God’s person,” especially as he brings salvation to Israel (Ex. 14:17–18; Ps. 96:3; Is. 60:1–2; Ezk. 39:21–22; Zc. 2:5–11)” (Davids 1982, 106–107).

Whatever the specific meaning of “the one of glory,” James’s point is clear:

Those who hold ‘the faith of our glorious Lord’ with partiality are not debasing just any belief, but rather a faith-commitment in the one exalted Lord Jesus whose glory will be fully revealed in eschatological judgment. As the tone implies, this is no matter for casualness or trifling; final judgment is at stake” (Davids 1982, 107).

A Case in Point (2.2–4)

Verses 2–4 describe a specific example of partiality among James’s readers. The setting is the “assembly,” or “meeting” (NIV) (v. 2), and the first matter we must address is its nature. “Assembly” translates συναγωγή (*synagōgē*), not the expected ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*). Some contend the assembly here is not the church’s worship gathering, but a judicial assembly—“a church-court”—where Christians were gathered, after the model of Jewish practice, to settle a dispute (cf. 1 Cor 6.1–8) (Davids 1982, 109; Blomberg & Kamell, 110–111). Moo acknowledges this possibility, and also notes that some think the use of *synagōgē* here “indicates that [James] was writing to Jewish Christians who were still attending Jewish synagogue meetings.” This interpretation is supported by the fact that elsewhere in the New Testament, *synagōgē* “refers to the Jewish house of worship (fifty-five other occurrences).” But Moo also points out that James refers to this *synagōgē* as “your synagogue,” an expression that “implies Christians had control over the meetings” (note also “my brothers” in v. 1). Noting that it would be natural for Jewish Christians “to carry over into their new covenant worship the terms and conventions familiar to them from their past experience,” Moo concludes—correctly in my judgment—that “assembly” here more likely refers to the Christians’ “weekly meeting for worship and instruction” (Moo 2000, 102–103). (I would add that the carry-over of familiar terms and conventions would have been even more likely in the early period in which this letter was written.)

But whatever James meant by *synagōgē*, the real issue in verses 2–4 is not the location or reason for the gathering. It is the fact that, when they met, some were discriminating against others. While it is possible the situation is exaggerated for emphasis (Davids 1982, 107), it is almost certainly rooted in reality: some participants in the assembly were making distinctions based on externals. One man was rich, indicated by the gold ring he wore—of a type worn by members of the Roman equestrian class (Moo 1985, 89)—and his “fine” (λαμπρός, *lampros*) clothing, that is,

bright or shining (Bauer 2000, 585). He is singled out and invited to sit “in a good place.” When the “poor man in shabby clothing”—“shabby” translates ῥυπαρός (*rhyparos*), “dirty, filthy, soiled” (Bauer 2000, 908)—he is told to “‘stand over there’ or ‘sit at my feet.’” (Phillips translates, “if you must sit, sit on the floor.”)

James’s rhetorical question in verse 4 makes his point: “have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” “Distinctions” (διακρίνω, *diakrinō*), the key word in the verse, is familiar from 1.6 where it is translated “doubt,” but is better rendered “waver” (as discussed [here](#)). It means “to differentiate by separating” or “to conclude there is a difference” (Bauer 2000, 231). By making a distinction in their treatment of the two men based on appearances, they were fracturing the assembly. Worse, they had “become judges [κριτής, *kritēs*; notice the wordplay with *diakrinō*] with evil thoughts,” guilty of the injustice Israel’s judges were told to avoid (Lev 19.15).

James’s further comments on their actions in verses 5–13 will demonstrate just how seriously we should take their offense.

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“Reprinted from David Anguish, ‘Opening the Scriptures,’ March 26, 2024”

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