



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

How Shall We Interpret James 4.5?

David Anguish

Our study of the teaching of James 4.4–6 faces a challenge when we come to verse 5, generally recognized as “one of the most difficult sayings in the whole book” (Loh and Hatton 1997, 142; cf. Martin 1988, 149); in fact, some consider it “one of the most difficult verses in the NT” (Moo 2000, 188). The different ways the verse is punctuated in the UBS and NA Greek texts and the variations in how the translations understand it illustrate the difficulty:

UBS 5: ἡ δοκεῖτε ὅτι κενῶς ἡ γραφή λέγει, Πρὸς φθόνον ἐπιποθεῖ τὸ πνεῦμα ὃ κατώκισεν ἐν ἡμῖν,

NA 28: ἡ δοκεῖτε ὅτι κενῶς ἡ γραφή λέγει· πρὸς φθόνον ἐπιποθεῖ τὸ πνεῦμα ὃ κατώκισεν ἐν ἡμῖν,

ESV: Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? (cf. NIV 2011, NRSV, NLT)

NASB: Or do you think that the Scripture says to no purpose, “He jealously desires the Spirit whom He has made to dwell in us”?

NIV 1984: Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? (cf. ASV, NKJV, NET, CSB)

Holman CSB: Or do you think it’s without reason the Scripture says that the Spirit who lives in us yearns jealously?

In this essay, we will focus only on identifying the issues to be considered and the options for interpretation.

Why So Difficult?

Dan McCartney, whose commentary devotes eight pages to the matter, identifies two reasons this verse is difficult to interpret. First, its meaning is ambiguous, presenting the interpreter with questions about the subject and object of the sentence, the nature of the yearning and jealousy referenced in the verse, and how it fits in the context of verses 4–6. Second, nothing quite like the “Scripture” offered in support of James’s point corresponds to any known text, either canonical or extrabiblical. Without knowledge of what James had in mind, the meaning he intended remains a mystery (McCartney 2009, 210).

McCartney helpfully presents in list form (a) the issues that need to be resolved to interpret the verse, (b) the possible options for discerning its meaning, and (c) the things we must consider in order to decide which of those options best explains the text (McCartney 2009, 210–213). The balance of this discussion will summarize the first two of his lists.

Issues to Resolve

He first identifies six interconnected questions that need to be resolved (McCartney 2009, 210–211). First, how should we understand the prepositional phrase *πρὸς φθόνον* (*pros phthonon*)? Pairing that phrase with the verb *ἐπιποθεῖ* (*epipothei*) that follows it in the Greek text, the ESV translates, “he yearns jealously.” But, as McCartney notes, it could be translated “for envy.” The ESV also understands “God” (v. 4) to be the antecedent of “he” which the translators understand to be the subject of the sentence. But this poses another challenge: can God ever be said to do anything “for envy”?

Second, what is the nature of the yearning? Is it a virtuous longing or a decadent lusting?

Third, is the “spirit” (*πνεῦμα*, *pneuma*) the human spirit, considered neutrally (the “breath of life” in Genesis); a negative spirit active in humans, as in Ephesians 2.2; or, as the NASB takes it, the divine Spirit that lives in believers?

Fourth, which textual variant was original to James? The UBS 5 and NA 28 texts read *κατόκισεν* (*katōkisen*), which means “to cause to dwell” and is descriptive of the action of God. But both take note of “the Byzantine text and a few other MSS [that] have the intransitive *κατόκησεν* (*katōkēsen*) here, which turns τὸ πνεῦμα (*to pneuma*) into the subject of the verb: ‘The spirit which lives within us’” (NET Bible Notes 2019) (note that the UBS apparatus designates *katōkisen* as a B reading, i.e., “almost certain”).

Fifth, if the verb is “causative, is God or the Spirit the subject of ‘yearns’?”

Sixth, how should the verse be punctuated? Does *pros phthonon* begin a separate sentence? Or should it be understood to delineate what the “Scripture” says?

Possible Meanings

Identifying these issues “narrows the field of possible resultant meanings to basically the following five options” (McCartney 2009, 211).

Option one: *pneuma* refers to the divine Spirit that God has caused to dwell in believers and is the one who is yearning jealously over his people. In other words, “God the Holy Spirit does not tolerate his people trying to be friends with the world” (McCartney 2009, 211).

Option two: God is yearning jealously over the divine Spirit that he has caused to dwell in believers (cf. NASB). The point then would be that there is a threat that he will withdraw the Spirit’s presence if his people persist in becoming friends with the world (McCartney 2009, 211).

Option three: God is yearning jealously over the human spirit, that is, the breath of life that he has put within us (ESV, NRSV, NIV 2011). The point then is that God desires his people to remain loyal to him and not align themselves with the world (McCartney 2009, 211).

Option four: the sense could be that “when the (human) spirit that God has caused to dwell in us yearns (for the pleasures of the world), envy (and thus fighting) is the result” (McCartney 2009, 212).

Option five: the human spirit that God has caused to dwell in us yearns enviously for the world (NIV 1984, ASV, NKJV, NET, CSB). The statement would then constitute either the reason for giving in to the temptation to follow the world or an acknowledgement of that tendency in people, including believers (McCartney 2009, 212).

[Option six: in a footnote, McCartney also mentions the option proposed by Sophie Laws who argues that verse 5 should be taken as two rhetorical questions that James asked because “man is torn by frustrated desires, aligning himself with the world against God.” In this interpretation, James is asking, “Does scripture mean nothing? Is this (according to scripture) the way the human spirit’s longing is directed by envy?” Once we comprehend the allusion James intends, the implicit answer, Laws concludes, is “surely not! According to scripture, the object of the spirit’s desire is God, and the things of God; and scripture says, too, God gives grace to those who come humbly to him (vv. 6 f.)” (Laws 1980, 178).]

Conclusion

How are we to resolve this challenging exegetical problem? We’ll think more about it in a subsequent discussion.

Works Cited

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Additional Thoughts on James

“Since wisdom is, for James, primarily a moral or ethical entity rather than an intellectual or cognitive one, the prayer mandate of 1:5 comes into clearer focus. The lack of wisdom that one should pray to have remedied is not an intelligence gap, but a moral gap. What is to be requested is the moral fortitude to face up to suffering and temptation and thereby become ‘perfect.’”

~ Dan G. McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker Academic, 2009), 288

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“Reprinted from David Anguish, ‘Opening the Scriptures,’ April 8, 2025”

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