

**THE THEME OF WISDOM
IN THE EPISTLE OF JAMES**

Robert F. Chaffin, Jr.*

A wise person once said, "There is only one way to acquire wisdom. But when it comes to making a fool of yourself, you have your choice of thousands of different ways."¹ As one looks at our chaotic world, it quickly becomes apparent that heavenly wisdom is what people desperately need to live as they should. These confused people believe that they know the correct way to live. But their understanding leads only to destruction. However, King Solomon, dubbed the wisest person (aside from Jesus Christ) to ever live, knew that having a right relationship with God was the only way to even begin acquiring wisdom: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Prov. 1:7).

This article examines the theme of wisdom in the Epistle of James, a major motif in the background of the writer and his document.² While not personified, wisdom is extolled here as a divine gift and superlative virtue. Additionally, wisdom possesses some personal characteristics that form a wisdom aretalogy, a poem in which the virtues of wisdom are listed and praised (Jas. 1:5; 3:13-18; cf. Wis. 7:22-24).³

James gives a clear, ethical connotation to wisdom.⁴ Wisdom, a gift given by God that must be wholeheartedly sought and asked for, must be relied upon to help one persevere, live a godly life, and have hope.⁵ More than just insight and good judgment, wisdom is "the endowment of heart and mind which is needed for the right conduct of life."⁶

Wisdom and the Epistle of James

The Epistle of James is highly affected by Old Testament wisdom literature (i.e. Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, the Wisdom of Solomon, and the Wisdom of Ben Sirach). James gives to wisdom the same prominence that Paul gives to faith, John gives to love, and Peter gives to hope. To attempt to better grasp the thrust of Old Testament wisdom literature, it is best to focus on the "teachers" or sages and their teachings of wisdom. Their emphasis regarding wisdom was on the practical application of it, not on its theoretical or philosophical concepts. Their goal was to enable one to cope with life through the application of wisdom, and to impose a certain order, especially in the area of verbal communication, via a prescribed course of action to take

*Robert F. Chaffin, Jr., (M.A. Bib. St. student, ATS)

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amidst the myriad experiences of life. Therefore, this prominence is one reason that the Epistle is frequently compared to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament.⁷ Especially significant are parallels between James and the Wisdom of Solomon and the Wisdom of Ben Sirach.

The Wisdom of Solomon is an exhortatory discourse written by a profoundly Hellenized Jew of Alexandria somewhere between 220 BC and AD 50 to Jews disillusioned and disappointed by the promises of Hellenization. The author wrote to encourage to take pride in their traditional faith and to justify their suffering. In encouraging the Jews, the author placed great emphasis on wisdom and its benefits on life. Wisdom is not something static; indeed, it is powerful and active because it is seen as synonymous with Divine Providence, controlling historical events, guiding the friends of God, and inspiring God's prophets (Wis. 7:27; 14:3). Wisdom is also powerful. It is supreme arbiter of all values and should therefore be pursued⁸ because "she (wisdom) hastens to make herself known to those who desire her" (Wis. 6:12-16).

Ben Sirach, a sage and professional scribe who lived in Jerusalem during the reign of Antiochus IV,⁹ composed the Wisdom of Ben Sirach sometime between 190 and 175 BC, just before Hellenization reached its most intense pitch.¹⁰ Sirach wrote to strengthen and encourage Jews whose faith was violently shaken by Greek philosophy and religion. He published his book to demonstrate that true wisdom, the path to honor and a distinguished life, was to be found in Jerusalem and not Athens.¹¹ Sirach's greatest interest was in the power of wisdom to shape human life for good and to provide answers to the heart's deepest questions.¹²

Russell states that "James' letter is wisdom literature at its best, a clear mirror of the teaching of Jesus."¹³ Hartin believes that James'

wisdom perspective is in line with the development of the wisdom trajectory extending from the Old Testament through to the New. In this sense James is clearly the bridge between the two testaments.¹⁴

James makes use of wisdom ideology in that the way in which he cites his material suggests that he is drawing from a common stock or fund of tradition (e.g. word pictures and metaphors)¹⁵ and that he uses the concept of wisdom in a way that is practical and hortatory.¹⁶

There are four examples or themes in which the Epistle of James is shown to be heir to wisdom literature.¹⁷ The four themes are: Old Testament

figures who embody wisdom, prayer and wisdom, peace and wisdom, and eschatological motifs and wisdom.

Purpose of the Wisdom Themes in the Epistle of James

What was happening in the Diaspora throughout the Hellenized Roman world that caused James to emphasize wisdom to such an extent? James addressed especially Jewish Christians (and any other Jews who would listen) caught up in the social and economic tensions in Palestine that eventually produced the Judean war of A.D. 66-70.¹⁸

James I holds the key to the epistle's structure and sets out the basic issue to be faced: "How is human existence to fulfill its goal and find its dignity in the midst of trials and persecution?"¹⁹ James instructs his readers that tribulations, no matter how severe, cannot undo God's plan for both the believer and the unbeliever. James asserts that in life a believer must rely upon God's wisdom to have the capacity to live in an obedient and moral fashion in order to promote good, restrain evil, and do away with all things that displease the Almighty (Jas. 5:1-10).

With this background, the four themes of wisdom in James will now be examined in detail, beginning with the Old Testament figures that James presents as those who embodied wisdom: Abraham, Rahab, Job, and Elijah.

Theme 1: Old Testament Figures Who Embodied Wisdom

As the first theme, James presents Old Testament figures who embodied wisdom. King Solomon was the most celebrated person to be intimately linked with wisdom in the Hebrew-Israelite religion. Solomon was great because, according to God, he prayed and desired only "discernment to understand justice" (1 Kgs. 3:5-12; cf. Wis. 7:5-7; Sir. 47:12-18). James, however, presents Abraham, Rahab, Job, and Elijah as persons of wisdom because they were of practical faith and prayer (Jas. 2:21, 23, 25; 5:11, 17).²⁰

Abraham

It is significant to Abraham and wisdom that James refers to Abraham as the "friend of God" (Jas. 2:23). It is possible that James refers to Isaiah 41:8: "But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, descendant of Abraham my friend" (cf. 2 Chron. 20:7). Here in Isaiah, the root of the Hebrew word "friend" means "to love." God loved Abraham with infinite affection.²¹ It was the special privilege of Abraham to be known as God's friend among the Hebrews. This friendship comprised both an active and

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passive element for Abraham, but it is the active element of obedience which the word principally enforces.²²

Lodge traces the origin of the title “friend of God” to the Wisdom of Solomon 7:26-27: “. . . [wisdom] is a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness . . . [it] passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God.” Those who possess God’s wisdom are therefore his friends. So Abraham is an appropriate example of a wise man. In relying solely upon God’s wisdom, he was faithful to God’s commands and obedient in being willing to sacrifice his son Isaac. In being willing to make the sacrifice, Abraham “[showed] by his good behavior his deeds [done] in the gentleness [that stems from] wisdom” (Jas. 3:13b).²³

In James 3:13b, James, using Abraham as an example, stresses two concepts related to wisdom. First, God’s wisdom, or true wisdom from above (i.e. Heaven; Jas. 3:17), produces good behavior or fine conduct. The idea that a person will exhibit fine conduct when led by God’s wisdom is consistent with Old Testament teaching. Abraham’s behavior was good in that he immediately responded to God’s command to sacrifice Isaac. Second, wisdom is characterized by meekness, just as Jesus, the pattern for all fine conduct, was meek (Matt. 11:29). Gentleness, or humility, is a great virtue because it is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:23). Abraham, amidst a potentially conflict-rich situation, was wise in not countering God. Instead, Abraham showed his wisdom by being patient and heeding what he was told. Therefore, when considering these two concepts of wisdom, it is clear that the life that can be described as both wise and meek is one that is under the control of God.²⁴

Because Abraham was such a great example of the embodiment of God’s wisdom, James used him as an external proof in his argument.²⁵ Proofs were not only part of Aristotelian rhetoric but were used by New Testament authors in planning their discourses.²⁶ In choosing Abraham, James presented his readers not with an invented illustration, but with solid historical evidence of the benefits of allowing God to guide one’s life amidst trying circumstances.

The powerful example of Abraham helped James’ readers to answer the question “How is human existence to fulfill its goal and find its dignity in the midst of trials and persecution?” While amidst social and economic tensions, they were to rely upon God’s wisdom to live life as he would have them live it. During that time they were to exhibit this wisdom by being humble. This is what James wanted his readers to do.

Rahab

James presents Rahab (Jas. 2:25), the heroine of the battle of Jericho (Josh. chap. 2), as one who embodied wisdom because of her good works in

saving Israel's two spies. In hiding the spies from certain death, Rahab exemplified the dictum that "a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (Jas. 2:24).²⁷ Rahab was wise in that she exhibited the fine conduct that only the wisdom from above could produce.

Ultimately she and her family were saved from destruction because she trusted in God and allowed herself to be directed by his wisdom. This is why James upholds Rahab as an example for imitation (cf. Heb. 11:31). When battle loomed, she did not rely on her resources and retreat. Instead she trusted God and took action. No matter how much trials loomed or were present for James' readers, he wanted them to trust God's wisdom and persevere.

Job

Job is one who embodies wisdom because of his practical faith and enduring patience (Jas. 5:11). While his readers suffered because of the current tensions, James exhorted them to think about the prophets as they too suffered because of their belief in God and ethical behavior (Jas. 5:10). In 5:11, James presents Job as one who suffered immense trials but did so with great steadfastness or endurance (cf. Jas. 1:3; Col. 1:11).²⁸

Just as God rewarded Job, so he will reward those who have endured trials when he returns. And, just as God had compassion and mercy on Job, so he will have on those who remain steadfast amidst persecution. James offers his readers hope because it is quite apparent from Job's life that Christians can withstand adversity.

Moreover, by examining Job's life, the readers can appreciate that there was a purpose behind what happened to him. Therefore they can be edified and encouraged.²⁹ By relying on God's wisdom, Job came to understand God's faithful nature before his material possessions were restored. Because of a thrilling, direct confrontation with God via spiritual insight, Job realized he could hope in God amidst his trials: "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now my [spiritual] eye sees Thee" (Job 42:5). Job rejected his pride for the things he said in the course of the debate with God and exhibited wisdom by showing humility: "Therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). Just as Abraham's life was under the control of God, so Job's became.

Elijah

Elijah, the fourth figure that James shows who embodies wisdom, was also a man of effective prayer as stated in James 5:17-18 (cf. 1 Kgs. 17-18). Jewish tradition pictured Elijah as a man renowned for his praying (cf. 2 Esdras 7:39-109). James shared in this tribute.³⁰

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Further, James shows that if Elijah, a man harassed by political trials and hostile Baal worshippers, found recourse in and answer to prayer, so could they. But Elijah did not do this via his wisdom, he did it by God's wisdom. James' observant readers would recall the discussion of "heavenly wisdom" in James 3:17-18 with its promise that "the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." So James uses the example of Elijah to stress the need for a peaceful solution gained by prayer and submission to God's divine will. Like Abraham, Elijah, through God's wisdom, humbly submitted to God and sought a peaceful solution for the situation around him.

Therefore, given these four great Old Testament examples, James' readers should also take a certain course of action. This type of presentation echoes what Aristotle stated about making a point based upon examples: ". . . from examples, when they are the result of induction from one or more similar cases, and when one assumes the general and then concludes the particular by an example . . ." ³¹ Using inductive argument James presented his readers with a series of examples (i.e. Abraham, Rahab, Job, and Elijah) in order to "conclude the particular" or make a point: ³² he wanted them in practical faith and prayer to seek peaceful solutions. ³³

Theme 2: Prayer and Wisdom

The second wisdom theme in James, prayer and wisdom, is linked with the first. Because of their practical faith, the effective prayers of Solomon and Job accomplished much. Solomon prayed for and received unparalleled wisdom: "Therefore I prayed, and understanding was given me; I called on God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me" (Wis. 7:7). Job's availing prayer in Job 42:8-10 remains a hallmark of the righteous man in James (Jas. 5:11, 16). If prayer is unanswered, however, the cause is disobedience to Torah and a failure to practice religion consistently in matters of social justice (cf. Prov. 28:9; Sir. 34:23-26). This trait of consistency is lacking in divided and disobedient persons who do not put their faith into action (Jas. 1:5-8; 22-27; 2:16-17; 4:2-3). ³⁴

Several passages in James that are linked with the book of the Wisdom of Solomon cover prayer and wisdom. ³⁵ Because wisdom literature was an international phenomenon in the ancient world, the book of the Wisdom of Solomon may have had a significant impact on James and his perception of the concept of wisdom. For example, Wisdom of Solomon 9:6 compares with James 1:5 in reference to the lack of wisdom: "For one who is perfect among human beings will be regarded as nothing without the wisdom that comes from [you, O God]."

Job is not only seen as one who embodied wisdom, but stands as an example of a prayerful person (Job 42:8-10) whose intercessions were effective as he remained constant in faith (Jas. 5:11). According to Proverbs, the same note of availing prayer is the hallmark of the righteous: “. . . the prayer of the upright is his delight . . . He hears the prayer of the righteous” (Prov. 15:8b, 29b). The same is true of James 5:16: “Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.”

James frequently addresses the causes of unanswered prayer and the actions to take to get proper results. As mentioned above, unanswered prayer is a symptom of disobedience to Torah and a failure to practice religion consistently in matters of social justice.

For example, in 1:5-8, because James saw how his readers were incorrectly responding to the tremendous political, social, and religious trials with doubt-filled prayers, he forcefully exhorted them to seek God’s wisdom in order to get their prayers answered and know how to live righteously amidst it all. James knew that God’s wisdom enabled one not only to have true perception of the world, but also how to take proper action in the world.³⁶ In admonishing his readers in this manner, James molded the Judaic sapiential axiom “affliction teaches endurance” to fit his theme of prayer and wisdom to show that “affliction produces endurance” (cf. the example of Job).³⁷

By using the concept of lacking wisdom in 1:5, James alluded to Old Testament wisdom themes, which closely connect wisdom, testing by trials, perfection, and the need to pray for wisdom.³⁸ For example, one wisdom theme is in Ben Sirach: “For at first she (wisdom) will walk with [those who serve her] on tortuous paths . . . and she will test them with her ordinances” (4:17; cf. Wis. 9:10-18). Another theme is found in Proverbs: “Know that wisdom is thus for your soul [because it gives hope to the wise;³⁹ therefore, it is important to] get wisdom and instruction and understanding” (23:18, 23b; 24:14).

Q, the hypothetical source that accounts for the Gospel material that Matthew and Luke have in common,⁴⁰ following Luke’s position on prayer in Luke 11:9-13, parallels James 1:5-8. Q’s instruction follows Jesus’ instruction on how to pray when Jesus gave the example of the “Our Father” prayer to his followers. Just as James instructs his readers to ask God in prayer for wisdom without doubting and double-mindedness, so does Q.⁴¹

James asserts that faith is the prerequisite of and key to generously answered prayer (Jas. 1:5, 6). He may have had the teaching of Jesus in mind when he wrote of doubt and its disastrous effects on prayer. There is no room for doubt: “And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive”

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(Matt. 21:21). Further, James may have also alluded to Jesus' command and promise regarding prayer: "Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened" (Matt. 7:7-8).⁴²

Wisdom comes as a result of asking in the spirit of that faith which is already being tested in the furnace of trials. James wants his readers to understand that in order to meet the trials, especially to meet them with joy (Jas. 1:2), they need power to know how to live as God would have them to live, and that power is found only in God's wisdom.⁴³ James wanted his readers to understand that, when they were empowered with God's wisdom, they would no longer doubt and be double-minded, but would be focused while strengthened by faith.

Another passage in James that links prayer with wisdom is 1:22-27.⁴⁴ In 1:5-8, James states that the believer who doubts, one who lacks God's wisdom, does not get prayer answered. In 1:22-27, James shows that the doubting believer is also a person who does not put faith into action. James here draws a parallel between a person looking in a mirror with one who puts faith into action. The one who only hears God's Word, that is, who does not put faith into action, is like one who looks in a mirror and quickly forgets about blemishes that call for immediate attention. This behavior is the mark of the foolish person. However, the wise person, the one who is guided by God's wisdom, remembers the blemishes and does something about them. By this James stresses that the soul of religion is in the practical value it gives to action and endeavor, not simply contemplation. And one of the best ways that one can be known that he or she is guided by God's wisdom is to put faith into action by helping the most defenseless members of society, the widows and orphans.⁴⁵ If the widows and orphans are hungry, they are to be fed; if without clothing, they are to be clothed; if cold, warmed (Jas. 2:16-17).

The final passage where James deals with prayer and wisdom is 4:2b-3. Here James echoes in negative form Jesus' exhortation on prayer: "And whatever you ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it" (Jn. 14:13-14).⁴⁶ James exhorts his readers to ask or pray to God to grant their desires. However, in light of James 3:13-18 (which is addressed in the third wisdom theme), the object in praying is not worldly gain or power, but getting God's desperately needed wisdom. Why? Because the believing community was quarreling and divided (4:1), being governed by the wisdom "from below."

In the small, face-to-face communities in which multitudes lived, all were vulnerable to the strains of ambition, jealousy, and anger. People were

highly competitive and sought to demonstrate their superiority over others by either eliciting signs of honor or handing out insults.⁴⁷ In these communities there were believers who wanted peace and those (i.e. the Zealots) who desired power, wanting to fight to the death in the interests of national freedom. Moreover, the issue of the situations of the poor and rich added only increased strife.⁴⁸ Sinful, worldly passion, not the Holy Spirit, was the controlling force in the lives of these people.

Because of the sins listed in 4:2-3, James asserted that true peace would not result from fighting and killing, but only as a result of asking for God's wisdom (1:5). In a way, the first part of verse three is an extension of the closing words of verse two; the sense of this verse is this: "You do not have because you do not ask God for wisdom; you do not receive because even when you ask God for wisdom you ask incorrectly."

Additionally, James asserts that not every prayer request would be answered, especially when asked with the wrong motives. God cannot and will not be fooled: "All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, but the LORD weighs the motives" (Prov. 16:2). When prayer is connected to acts of murder and revenge based on zeal, it both fails and deserves to fail (cf. Sir. 28:14-26). Moreover, James states that the only reason the believers asked anything from God was so they could "spend [his gifts] on [their sinful, hedonistic] pleasures (4:3)."

Jewish prayers typically asked God to supply genuine needs, and Jesus promised to answer these types of prayers (Matt. 6:33).⁴⁹ But James knew that the gift sought by his readers was not going to be used to help others or to please God; these were not genuine needs. The desire for the gift or gifts could have been an evil desire to gain God's wisdom for the sole purpose of defeating enemies.⁵⁰

Theme 3: Peace and Wisdom

Third is the theme of peace and wisdom. The close link in James between wisdom as God's gift to be sought in prayer and the blessing of "peace" (Jas. 3:17-18) invites a comparison with a similar connection drawn in wisdom literature. Ben Sirach is a rich deposit of this teaching. Wisdom bestows her first gift (or fruit) with the offer of peace (Sir. 1:18). Ben Sirach emphasizes that peace brings joy and joy acts as a shield against sin: "... those who seek [wisdom] from the early morning are filled with joy . . . and those who work with [wisdom] will not sin" (Sir. 4:12; 24:22). This teaching goes back to Proverbs where the author shows that "[Wisdom's] ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace" (Prov. 3:17). Further, this teaching

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emphasizes that both peace and longevity are a consequence of faithfulness to God's commands.

Other fruits of wisdom are goodwill and meekness, both signs of obedience to God's law (Sir. 2:16; 15:1). Goodwill and wisdom are virtues in James (2:8; 5:16). Additionally, it is in Ben Sirach 24:13-17 that wisdom like a tree produces both peace and prosperity in a nature study that James exploits (Jas. 1:11; 3:11-12; 3:18).⁵¹

First, wisdom brings the fruit of peace (Jas. 3:13-18; cf. Sir. 1:18). Here James offers a finely drawn set of contrasts between two kinds of wisdom: earthly or demonic, and heavenly or pure, the kind which "comes down from above." In making these contrasts, James lists seven characteristics of true wisdom: it is pure, it is ready for peace, it is gentle, it is compliant, it is full of mercy and good fruit, it is impartial, and it is sincere (Jas. 3:17).⁵² In presenting this list, James draws striking parallels between his passage and the fruits of the Holy Spirit listed by Paul in Galatians 5:22-6:8.⁵³ Additionally, the Wisdom of Solomon parallels James' passage. For example, wisdom is praised as a great teacher of all that is noble, holy, beneficent, humane, and, in particular, pure and peaceful (Wis. 7:22-30).⁵⁴

In James' passage, wisdom is first pure. Just like God, the life of the believer should be morally perfect and undefiled (Phil. 4:8; 1 Jn. 3:3). Second, wisdom is ready for peace. Since it is from above, it is therefore diametrically opposed to the divisiveness of the earthly, sensual, and demonic inspiration of the arrogant and ambitious. Third, wisdom is gentle. In a position of strength, the wise person is considerate of those who might otherwise be dominated or manipulated. Fourth, wisdom is compliant. In a position of weakness, the wise one is not stubborn but reasonable, yielding, and obedient (cf. Abraham). Fifth, wisdom is full of mercy and good fruit. True wisdom results in true religion and true faith (Jas. 1:27; 2:15-17). Sixth, wisdom is impartial. It does not make distinctions. And seventh, wisdom is sincere. It has nothing to hide, is without hypocrisy, and is genuine. It can be taken at face value.⁵⁵

James was impressing upon his readers that peace, as a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22), was to be their goal in dealing with others (Rom. 12:18; 14:19).⁵⁶ James stressed that peace is essential to practical, righteous living because it is peace which gives birth to the remaining six characteristics of wisdom. Or, put another way, peace is the seed sown that bears purity, gentleness, compliancy, impartiality, sincerity, mercy and good fruit.

From wisdom comes peace, and from peace, goodwill. Goodwill is a character trait seen in obedience to God's law as James states in 2:8: "If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law, according to the Scripture, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,' you are doing well." Ben Sirach

also emphasized goodwill, God's law, and wisdom: "Those who fear the Lord seek to please him, and those who love him are filled with his law. . . . whoever holds to the law will obtain wisdom" (2:16; 15:1b).

The "royal law" of James 2:8 was given in Leviticus 19:18 by God and affirmed by Jesus: "[This,] the second [commandment] is like [the first], 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF' (Matt. 22:39). The law is royal or regal because it is decreed by God, the King of kings, is fit for a king, and is considered the king of laws because it refers to the entire will of the sovereign God. James wanted his readers to know that obedience to this law, nonpreferential love, was the answer to the evident disobedience of God's law, prejudicial favoritism (Jas. 2:9).⁵⁷ To display this type of great love takes wisdom not from below but from above, not of human design but divine.

From wisdom comes peace, and also from peace, prosperity. By way of examples in nature, James presents a study that shows a logical connection between prosperity, peace, and wisdom (Jas. 1:11, 12; 3:11-12).⁵⁸ Similarly, in Ben Sirach 24:13-17, in the rich poetic imagery of beautiful Palestinian flora, personified wisdom describes the privileged, prosperous position of Israel brought about by her active and special presence:⁵⁹

I grew tall like a cedar in Lebanon, and like a cypress on the heights of Hermon. I grew tall like a palm tree in En-gedi . . . like a fair olive tree . . . like a plane tree beside water I grew tall. . . . Like the vine I bud forth delights, and my blossoms become glorious and abundant fruit.

First, in 1:11, using the imagery of Isaiah 40:6-7, James shows by the examples of the quick death of grass and flowers that human life, along with its prideful independence and self-sufficiency, is frail and transitory. When ignoring God and looking solely to self, one will not prosper.⁶⁰

But, the person who asks for and follows God's wisdom is "blessed," even and especially when experiencing trials (Jas. 1:12). When one is blessed by God, one prospers in that he or she is the recipient of divine favor.⁶¹ James may have recalled Jesus' very words regarding this: "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven" (Matt. 3:10). The pronouncing of blessedness on faithful Jews who walk in God's way and turn aside from evil is common not only in canonical wisdom literature, but in apocryphal wisdom literature also.⁶² For example, Ben Sirach 14:20 declares a person "happy who meditates on wisdom and [consequently] reasons intelligently."

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Prosperity in relation to wisdom is also seen in examples from nature (Jas. 3:11-12). These are part of a larger paragraph in which James, drawing upon an argument of the absurd (cf. Amos 6:12-13), warns his readers against inflammatory speech and cursing (Jas. 1:19, 26) because all are made in God's image (Jas. 3:9-12).⁶³

James produces the common examples in 3:11-12 out of impossible incongruity. Figs, olives, and grapes were the three most common agricultural products of the Judean hills, and alongside wheat they would have constituted the most common crops of the Mediterranean region as a whole. That everything brought forth after its kind was a matter of common observation and became proverbial in Greco-Roman circles.⁶⁴ For example, Seneca, the Roman Stoic philosopher (4 BC - AD 65), understood this fact quite clearly when he said that "Good does not spring from evil any more than figs grow from olive trees."⁶⁵

Additionally, the Sermon on the Mount section of Q shows a parallel with James 3:11-12.⁶⁶ This parallel is evident in part B of Q (6:43-44), where Jesus emphasizes discipleship and urges the disciples to seek help from above (cf. Matt. 7:16-18; Lk. 6:43-44).⁶⁷ While the terminology of the texts of James and Q are not derived from each other, the thought content is the same. Both James and Q present a rhetorical question, which expects the answer: "That is impossible!" While the images used are not exactly in parallel traditions, a similar thought does appear: just as a tree only produces good or bad fruit according to its nature, so with persons: they will produce good or evil deeds according to their own nature.⁶⁸

James expected negative answers to the questions he presented in 3:11-12. A spring produces only one type of water: either good or bad. Yet it was possible for two or more springs to flow together to produce water unfit for human consumption. Through this, James makes this point: one spring does not alternate between producing both good and bad water.⁶⁹ In light of this truth, the human tongue should not alternate between producing "good and bad water," or blessings and cursings; it is not to be an instrument of inconsistency. It is to be Spirit-controlled so it produces only "fresh water" or blessings for all. The believer must remember that one drop of bad or brackish water spoils an entire bucket of fresh water. So too must the believer keep in mind that one word of curse ruins a day's, month's, or year's worth of having received many words of blessing.

Therefore, in keeping with the wisdom tradition in this nature example, James emphasizes that words of blessing (i.e. words leading to eternal life) and words of cursing (i.e. words of spiritual destitution leading to eternal death) are in the power of the tongue (Jas. 3:3-8; cf. Ps. 141:3).⁷⁰ The

believer's tongue is so powerful that it can create words that could lead an unbeliever either to salvation in Jesus Christ, or, cause the unbeliever to curse the name of Christ. Spurgeon knew of the power and tremendous influence of the human tongue:

The tongue is the principal instrument in the cause of God; and it is the chief engine of the Devil; give him this, and he asks for more--there is no mischief or misery he will not accomplish by it. The use, the influence of it, therefore, is inexpressible; and words are never to be considered only as effects, but as causes, the operation of which can never be fully imagined.⁷¹

Theme 4: Eschatological Motifs and Wisdom

Fourth are eschatological motifs and wisdom. In wisdom books such as the Wisdom of Solomon, a link exists between practical religion and the yearning for divine intervention into history. This link exists due to a common concern to trace all activity, divine and human alike, to God the Creator who places all things "in order" (Gen. 1; Job 28; Ps. 104). Evil, which connotes disorder and disharmony with the will of the Creator, poses a challenge to his purpose.⁷² But in the end, on the day when God himself returns to earth, he will fully restore order and divine rule after smashing the lawless kingdoms of the earth. Those who are his will be in his hand at peace. The wicked, who oppressed the poor and weak, after being judged for their criminal acts, will become shameful carcasses and eternal objects of outrage among the dead.⁷³ In light of the trials and persecutions James' readers experienced, he exhorted them via eschatological arguments and wisdom to be patient and wait for God to return and destroy the godless and give salvation to the righteous.

James conveys this form of teaching regarding the last day but also shows how important wisdom is for the present. He stresses wisdom in creation of the natural elements, the regenerate believer, and the call for order to reverse the destructive effects of evil (Jas. 1:18; cf. 3:6). Even of greater importance, James argues that the present social inequalities and injustices cry out for divine visitation and rectification (Jas. 2:5-7; 4:11-12; 5:1-9). In the meantime, until God returns to act, James counsels his readers to patience and quiet waiting. This waiting is to be done in the spirit of the wisdom teachers that took Job as their model (Jas. 5:10, 16).⁷⁴

The term "eschatology," formed from the Greek adjective meaning "last or final," was coined in the early 19th century by theologians to refer to

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that part of systematic theology which deals with Christian beliefs concerning death, the afterlife, judgment, and the resurrection. The term is now used more broadly to refer to the whole constellation of beliefs and conceptions about the end of history and the transformation of the world which particularly characterized early Judaism, early Christianity, and Islam.⁷⁵ For James, eschatology provides an intelligent comprehension of the future as an ethical guide for the present, and a sure ground for hope in God.⁷⁶

The central foci of these beliefs are the judgment of sinners and the salvation of the righteous. In early Judaism and early Christianity eschatological beliefs were often linked with a sense of urgency in view of the imminent expectation of the end of the age, although the degree of urgency or imminence varies in accordance with the particular social situation in which such beliefs are thought meaningful (e.g. persecution, feelings of alienation, etc.). In the realm of eschatology, the future is more important than the present since the existing world order will soon be overthrown.⁷⁷

Jesus spoke of the "end" (e.g. Matt. 24:14). The Kingdom of God, which occupies a position of paramount importance in New Testament eschatology,⁷⁸ was central to Jesus' message (e.g. Matt. 12:28; Mk. 1:15).⁷⁹ He saw history as having a final judgment at its boundary. A strong sense of crisis and urgency pervades his teaching because, when judgment comes, many who expect to be judged favorably will not be, and those who do not will be.⁸⁰ Jesus stressed this fact to the disciples when he told them that "the last shall be first, and the first last" (Matt. 20:16).

Intertwined in James with eschatology is the concept of theodicy, an attempt to defend divine justice in the face of aberrant phenomena that appear to indicate the deity's indifference or hostility toward virtuous people. Theodicy was never just a theoretical problem of the individual; divine justice involved society itself--the distribution of goods, access to knowledge and power, and the formation of legal statutes.⁸¹

Wisdom literature addressed the problem of theodicy with fervor. Crenshaw is correct in stating that:

The book of Job offered several partial answers--human ignorance, divine mystery, corrective discipline, delayed punishment and rewards--but acknowledged the problem as an insolvable enigma before which the best response was silence in the presence of a self-revealing creator. Ben Sirach lifted the arguments out of the realm of verification, insisting on metaphysical and psychological answers, specifically that nature rewards virtue and punishes vice,

and that evil people suffer psychic stress. The Wisdom of Solomon endorsed both answers, emphasizing the latter with specific reference to the Egyptians who held Israel in bondage.⁸²

Also intertwined in James with eschatology is ethics. In light of God's return, James exhorted his readers to exhibit the seven characteristics of God's wisdom toward each other (Jas. 3:17-18). Even amidst the irrationality of persecution, they were to be morally perfect, considerate, wise, obedient, merciful, impartial, and sincere with each other.

The testing of persecution (1:2) that James' readers encountered caused them to be tempted (1:12-16) to cast aspersions on God's character. James' saw that persecution raised questions of faith in God's providence and care for his own. This was a concern in both canonical and deuterocanonical literature.⁸³ In response, James offered an extended theodicy seeking to justify the ways of a Providence that permitted suffering and trial.⁸⁴

In 1:17-18, James begins his eschatological motifs by stressing that even in the creation of the natural world, especially the creation of God's life in a believer, the wisdom of God is clearly evident. Here, via theodicy, James does not want his readers either to blame God for the persecution or deny that God has the ability to provide relief. James asserts that God has not changed nor will he ever; in God there is "no variation or shifting shadow." While God has not yet returned to right the wrongs, he has not given up on those he loves because he has not changed. James' readers must, therefore, patiently wait on God to return. And, while they wait, they must not yield to any temptation, especially that of blaming God. How are they to accomplish this? They are to "ask of God [who is the source of true wisdom], [to give wisdom] to [them]" (Jas. 1:5).

James continues his eschatological motifs in 2:5-7, which are part of a larger pericope (Jas. 2:1-13) in which James warns against a disparaging of the poor and a preference for the rich in the community.⁸⁵ Here James presents the "poor, the pious and humble, who put their trust in God for redemption, as "rich in faith" or spiritual matters in that they have a guaranteed place in the Kingdom of God. And yet, while not in danger of losing their eschatological salvation, they were guilty of dishonoring others who were also poor. In behaving this way they were guilty of favoritism and not loving their neighbor.⁸⁶ Therefore, they did not act as those who possess God's wisdom because the Jewish wisdom tradition stressed that those who respected God should not show favoritism (cf. Jas. 2:1).⁸⁷

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In 4:11-17, James presents yet another eschatological motif. Here he returns to the specific worldly behavior his readers are following--sins involving violent speech (Jas. 3:1-12). His general guiding principle was standard Old Testament and Jewish wisdom instruction that opposed slander. For example, the wisdom teachers in Israel called slander the practice of the use of the "third tongue" in that it "killed" three persons: the speaker, the one spoken to, and the one spoken about.⁸⁸ Ben Sirach parallels this teaching, "Slander has shaken many, and scattered them from nation to nation; it has destroyed strong cities, and overturned the houses of the great." Many of James' readers may not have been considering this in this context because human knowledge is at best partial and often prejudiced, especially when guided by "wisdom from below." The law declared God's love for Israel and commanded his people to love one another; to slander a Jew was thus to disrespect law in that the slanderer, in sinful pride, appeared above it.⁸⁹ God was (and is) the only One rightfully above the law because he gave it; he is its author.

In 4:13-17, James denounces the oppressors (the high social class and the merchants) and their self-satisfied forgetfulness of God. The merchants' practice of planning for the future by presuming to order their own business lives and destinies was a sign to James that they were not wise. "Boasting of tomorrow" is warned against in Proverbs 27:1 because life is frail; it is in God's sovereign control (cf. Lk. 12:16-21).⁹⁰ In light of the merchant's behavior, and, since the "Judge [was] standing at the door," James exhorted his readers to have the wisdom to possess the correct mindset of "if the Lord wills" because, according to both Jewish and Stoic wisdom, "they did not know what their life would be like [the next day]." Therefore, any plans should be made with God's divine permission.

In 5:1-10, James presents the final eschatological motif. James' denunciation of the wealthy oppressors, namely the agriculturists, takes the form of an Old Testament prophetic judgment oracle, paralleled also in some Jewish wisdom and apocalyptic texts.⁹¹ The difference between his denunciation of the rich and the violent speech he condemns (Jas. 4:11) is that he appeals to God's judgment rather than to human retribution (Jas. 4:12; cf. Deut. 32:35; Prov. 20:22). Just as Jesus warned against the love of money (Matt. 6:24), so too James warned against the love of getting. Why? Because wealth was not an end in itself; to hoard goods was folly. In reference to wealth and salvation, Jesus said, "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mk. 8:36-37). James warned that when God returns, the selfish

rich, because of their folly in not relying upon God's wisdom, will be held accountable and severely judged.

In 5:7-10, James states that the oppressed must wait on God's return rather than take matters violently into their own hands. However, they could speak out against injustice, but not hostilely. In these verses, James stresses that his readers have forgotten that God is the Judge whose coming is close at hand.

Here James' eschatological motif has two parts. First, it encourages the readers to "confirm their hearts" (5:8). Second, in respect to the Parousia, it repeats the summons to curb impatience.⁹² The essence of patience is seen in the example of the farmer who waits patiently for needed rains and ultimately a valuable crop at harvest time. James used the well-known example of harvest time as an image of the day of judgment. Amidst this, James called for his readers to stop groaning and cease their petty conflicts. While waiting for God to return, they must be on their best behavior, living righteously, just as the prophets did while they endured much suffering with patience.

First, James encouraged his readers to "confirm their hearts" in 5:8. Here he repeats the thought of 5:7 for emphasis. In doing so, he stresses the idea of the nearness of God's return to keep the tension of the endtimes before his readers to teach that their generation could be "the last." James' point is not the length of time between the present and the return of God, but how one deals with the interim of waiting.⁹³

Second, in 5:9-10, James condemned his readers' complaining against one another because this destroyed harmony in the believing community. Rather, amidst the difficult circumstances, they were to be extremely patient, just like the prophets were. For they, like the prophets who spoke in God's name, were persecuted because they were his messengers. Again, James used the prophets as positive examples (cf. Sir. 44:16) of those who endured hardship to strengthen his community and show that patience was a characteristic common to all who have served God.

Hartin asserts that because James' admonition of "the Judge is standing right at the door" of 5:9 was part of the Jesus tradition (cf. Matt. 24:33; Mk. 13:29), it was also found in Q. And, because it was in Q and James had knowledge of Q, James applied this concept in his teaching of the eschatological motifs. Because the "Judge is standing right at the door," no one else had the right to judge, since, according to Q, God alone was Judge.⁹⁴

Important to James' teaching in 5:7-10 is that of the Parousia. Early Palestinian Christians lived in the imminent expectation of the return of Jesus Christ as the Son of Man to bestow salvation and execute judgment. However,

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with the passage of time, the process of institutionalization, and the expansion of Christianity into the world of Roman Hellenism, the fervency and imminence of eschatological expectation began to diminish so that the significance which eschatology once had in Christian belief became increasingly less important. The widespread realization of the problem of the delay of the Parousia necessitated a theological adjustment.⁹⁵

Evidently, James' readers were confused over the Parousia. It is only on this assumption that the strong eschatological tones and explicit references in the previous verses can be accounted for. However, the issue is not determining the hour of the Parousia, not overconfidence about its nearness, nor even the denial of its imminence. The issue over the Parousia, therefore, was practical--that of instilling patience. James makes much of the interval "between the times," specifically by employing the allusions to sowing, reaping, and harvesting. James wanted to impress upon his readers that their eschatological deliverance could not be hastened, only awaited. Any action to hasten God's return shows not only impatience (just like an impatient farmer who always ends up disappointed), but foolishness, because judgment would follow.

Conclusion and Application

James speaks a clear word to an unclear world. He presents timeless, divine principles that call believers to a relevant, ethical Christianity. In doing so, he covers all aspects of life: personal, social, and religious. Moreover, he emphasizes that there is not just hope for tomorrow, but today, no matter what the circumstances.

James' main concern is with Christian behavior, its consistency, and its community context. There should be consistency between faith and action, consistency in different activities, a common concern for one another.⁹⁶ But to be consistent requires a certain kind of behavior, that being ethical. And the way to this type of behavior is to rely upon and follow God's wisdom, to which James gives clear commands and ethical connotations. The ethical life flows as the fruit of God's divine gift of wisdom. And God's wisdom is powerful. It is a divine force that overcomes temptation, testing, persecution, and enables one to be patient at all times.⁹⁷

As born-again believers, are our lives different from non-believers? Are we motivated by and guided by God's wisdom from above? Do we display the characteristics of his wisdom to our family, friends, and co-workers? Do we look around us with hopelessness at all the evil in the world, or are we strengthened by the hope of God's return? Let us pray for God's wisdom.

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²The other major motif is the picture of the righteous sufferer in the Jewish community. R. P. Martin, *James* (WBC 48; Waco: Word, 1988) lxxxvii.

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- ⁸¹J. L. Crenshaw, "Theodicy," *ABD* 6,444.
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