ER 1.1 (2009): 29-45

The Poetry of Wisdom: A Note on James 3.6

Sarah-Jane Austin

Abstract

James 3.6 presents complex exegetical difficulties and is often declared textually corrupt. However, since James was probably influenced by Hebrew wisdom literature, and since this is typically poetic, a consideration of Hebrew poetic parallelism may help to make sense of the text as it stands. Viewed in the light of Berlin's analysis of parallelism, James 3.1-12 is particularly rich in poetic devices, and this suggests that in 3.6 poetic function overrides the requirements of normal syntax. A reading is proposed which arranges the verse in three balanced couplets and situates it in the overlap of two major groups of metaphors.

1. Introduction

James 3.6 is notoriously difficult, piling up nominative phrases with no apparent indication of how to arrange them into clauses, and using strange images such as ὁ τροχός τῆς γενέσεως. Although several scholars have come to the conclusion that the text must be corrupt,[1]

[1] E.g. James Hardy Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James*, ICC (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), 234; Martin Dibelius, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 195.

others insist that every effort must be made to make sense of the text as it stands.[2]

This article concerns the possibility that in this passage of James, influenced as it probably is by Hebrew wisdom literature, we should take Hebrew poetic parallelism into consideration. Using Adele Berlin's more comprehensive linguistic approach to parallelism, rather than the purely semantic principles of Lowth or even Kugel, it will suggest that Jas 3.1-12 is particularly rich in poetic devices, and that perhaps in 3.6 poetic function overrides the requirements of normal syntax. A reading will be proposed which arranges the verse in three balanced couplets and situates it in the overlap of two major groups of metaphors.

2. James' Poetic Heritage

The idea that James might, consciously or unconsciously, exploit Hebrew poetic devices in his excellent Greek style must remain largely conjectural. However, a relationship is widely recognised between James and Jewish Wisdom literature, much of which is poetry.[3] One strand of the evidence for this relationship is James' rich use of metaphor, especially in 3.3–12.[4] Many have also noted the presence of semitisms in this epistle. Davids, for instance, citing five examples, lists parallelism as one of several linguistic phenomena that suggest that 'behind the fine Greek of the epistle lies a Semitic mind and thought pattern.'[5]

---

[2] E.g. Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James: An Introduction and Commentary*, Pillar Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 156–7; Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 141–2.

[3] Other scholars have placed the stylistic phenomena of James in the context of Hellenistic rhetoric (e.g. Duane F. Watson, 'The Rhetoric of James 3:1–12 and a Classical Pattern of Argumentation,' *NovT* 35.1 (1993): 48–64). The influences of Judaism and Hellenism are not, however, necessarily incompatible. Cheung argues that although the genre of James is Jewish wisdom instruction, it 'shows formal features of both hellenistic paraenesis and Jewish wisdom instruction.' Luke L. Cheung, *The Genre, Composition and Hermeneutics of James* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 49.

[4] Dan G. McCartney, 'The Wisdom of James the Just,' *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4:3 (2000): 53.

[5] 1.9, 11, 13; 4.8–9; 5.4. Davids, *James*, 59.

Bauckham, similarly, places Jesus, and following him James, in the tradition of the wisdom poets who employed such parallel forms as 'synonymous couplets,' [6] 'antithetical and paradoxical aphorisms,' [7] and similitudes couched in 'short two-line sayings.'[8] According to Bauckham, synonymous parallelism is relatively rare in most Jewish literature written in Greek, but is 'frequent in the Wisdom of Solomon,' and employed by 'a frequent minority of sayings in James.'[9] His list of examples expands significantly on those given by Davids.

Although a glance at English translations of Proverbs and Psalms shows that much Hebrew semantic parallelism survives translation, Davids doubts that the parallelism in James can wholly be explained by dependence on the LXX.[10] Certainly some of the other semitic features he lists, such as 'the use of the genitive of an abstract noun instead of an adjective' or 'the use of the dative similar to the Hebrew infinitive absolute,'[11] imply familiarity with the Hebrew Bible in the original language, or at least of some of its linguistic idioms. In this article we shall assume that James could have been aware of some of the range of poetic devices used by the OT writers. However, the thesis does not wholly rely on this assumption, because parallelism is by no means confined to Hebrew. Berlin, for instance, whose work is discussed in the next section, cites examples from English literature, including Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.[12]

3. Berlin and *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*

The Hebrew poetic devices that may find an echo in James are more varied than even Bauckham's analysis would suggest. Bauckham's concern is with wisdom paranaesis and the rhetorical 'importance of

---

[6] Richard Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage* (London: Routledge, 1999), 39.
[7] Bauckham, *James*, 40.
[8] Bauckham, *James*, 49.
[9] Bauckham, *James*, 39.
[10] Davids, *James*, 59.
[11] Davids, *James*, 59.
[12] Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1985), 125–6.

the short aphoristic saying.'[13] While he turns our attention away from larger structural issues to 'the literary forms of the small literary units of which James is composed,'[14] his focus is still on the content rather than on the poetic form per se. His categorisation of aphorisms is of finer grain than either Lowth's or Kugel's treatment of Hebrew poetic parallelism,[15] but like them he uses a fundamentally semantic model which compares whole cola at a time.

Adele Berlin's *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* develops a much broader concept of parallelism in Hebrew poetry. Drawing on linguistic theory, she describes a variety of forms of syntactic, semantic and phonological parallelism:[16]

Level	*Aspect*		
	Grammatical	Lexical-Semantic	Phonological
Word	Morphological equivalence and/or contrast	Word pairs	Sound pairs
Line or clause	Syntactic equivalence and/or contrast	Semantic relationship between lines	Phonological equivalence of lines

The presence of such parallelisms does not necessarily imply lineated poetry. Berlin 'basically' agrees with Kugel 'that there is a continuum of elevated style in the Bible.'[17] However, she rejects Kugel's more extreme claim that there is no such thing as biblical poetry, arguing that poetry and prose can indeed be distinguished: 'It is not parallelism per se, but the predominance of parallelism,

[13] Bauckham, *James*, 35.

[14] Bauckham, *James*, 35.

[15] Lowth proposed three types of parallelism: synonymous, antithetical and synthetic. Kugel recognized only one, which takes the form, 'A and what's more B.' Both models are described in James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1981).

[16] Berlin, *Dynamics*, 29. These forms of parallelism can operate not only between cola in a line, but at lower levels (i.e. within cola) and at higher levels in a poem. Phonology is the study of the sound system of languages.

[17] Berlin, *Dynamics*, 5.

combined with terseness, which marks the poetic expression of the Bible.'[18] Moreover, she says, 'It is then, not the mere presence, even in large amounts, of the poetic function that distinguishes poetry, but its "dominance." In poetry, the poetic function overrides the other functions.'[19]

Thus in considering the possibility of 'poetic function' in James 3, we must not merely identify parallelism, or even parallelism combined with terseness, but must also demonstrate that parallelism has, however transitorily, become the 'constructive device'[20] of the text. The next section will use Berlin's categories to identify parallelism in Jas 3.1–12 as a whole. Section 5 will then propose that the difficulties of reading 3.6 as prose may be related to the temporary dominance of the poetic function.

4. Poetic function in James 3.1–12

4.1 Grammatical Parallelism

4.1.1 Morphologic Parallelism

In this category, Berlin includes:[21]

- Morphologic pairs from different word classes (noun/pronoun, noun/relative clause, prepositional phrase/adverb, substantive/verb)
- Morphologic pairs from the same word class (contrasting in tense, conjugation, person, gender, number, definiteness, case or miscellaneous other details).

Possibly only the latter type can be found in Jas 3.1–12:

- In v. 7b, the verbs δαμάζεται and δεδάμασται form a present/perfect pair.
- In vv. 3–4, μετάγομεν and μετάγεται form an active/passive pair.
- In v. 6, φλογίζουσα and φλογιζομένη form an active/passive

[18] Berlin, *Dynamics*, 5.
[19] Berlin, *Dynamics*, 9.
[20] Berlin, *Dynamics*, 17.
[21] Berlin, *Dynamics*, 32–53.

pair.[22]

4.1.2 Syntactical Parallelism

Berlin divides this class into:[23]

- Nominal/verbal (either a nominal clause paired with a verb clause, or nominal and verbal forms of the same root)
- Positive/negative
- Subject/object
- Contrast in grammatical mood.

Here Jas 3.1–12 offers examples of at least two types:

- In vv. 9–10, the verbal and nominal forms of εὐλογέω and καταράομαι are in parallel.
- In v. 8a, the infinitive δαμάσαι contrasts in grammatical mood with the indicative forms of δαμάζω in the previous verse.

4.2 Lexical and Semantic Aspects

4.2.1 Word Pairs

Word pairs are a well-recognised phenomenon of both Ugaritic and Hebrew poetry, where they are used to create semantic parallelism. It was once thought that Ancient Near Eastern poets worked with fixed lists of such pairs. Berlin explains, however, that in the light of modern linguistics they are more probably the result of the word association that occurs in all human languages.[24]

Possible word pairs in Jas 3.1–12 include:

- μικρός and μέγας (v. 5)
- μέλος and σῶμα (v. 6)
- θηρίον and πετεινόν ἑρπετόν and ἐνάλιον (v. 7)
- εὐλογέω and καταράομαι (v. 9)
- ἀλυκός and γλυκύς (v. 12).
- ἀλυκός and πικρός (vv. 11–12).

---

[22] Mayor notes James' 'repetition of different parts of the same verb' in 1.13; 3.6, 7. Joseph Bickersteth Mayor, *The Epistle of St James* (London: Macmillan, 1913), 118.

[23] Berlin, *Dynamics*, 54–63.

[24] Berlin, *Dynamics*, 65–83.

4.2.2 Lexical, Grammatical and Semantic Patterning

Having shown that these three forms of parallelism can operate independently or together, Berlin shows how they are used to form three patterns: *aabb*, *abab*, and *abba*.[25]

Aabb patterning (actually caabbc) is found in Jas 3.7:

C πᾶσα γὰρ φύσις
  A θηρίων τε καὶ πετεινῶν
    A′ ἑρπετῶν τε καὶ ἐναλίων
    B δαμάζεται
  B′ καὶ δεδάμασται
C′ τῇ φύσει τῇ ἀνθρωπίνῃ

Abab semantic patterning is found in Jas 3.5:

A οὕτως καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα μικρὸν μέλος ἐστὶν
  B καὶ μεγάλα αὐχεῖ
A′ ἰδοὺ ἡλίκον πῦρ
  B′ ἡλίκην ὕλην ἀνάπτει

Patterning (abacbc) is also evident in v. 5b-6:

ἰδοὺ ἡλίκον πῦρ
  ἡλίκην ὕλην ἀνάπτει·
καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα πῦρ·
  ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας ἡ γλῶσσα

4.2.3 The Semantic Aspect and Parallelism as Metaphor

For Berlin, metaphor is a facet of semantic parallel equivalence, in so far as this involves the juxtaposition of different lines 'that do not have the same deep semantic structure' and yet 'are considered equivalent.'[26]

---

[25] Berlin, *Dynamics*, 83–88.

[26] Berlin, *Dynamics*, 100.

The metaphors in Jas 3.2–12, following James' introductory warning against hastiness to become teachers (v. 1), fall into two main groups:

- Bit/horse; rudder/ship; spark/forest
  as metaphors for tongue/whole life (vv. 2–5)
- Spring with foul and sweet water; plants with right and wrong fruit
  as metaphors for tongue with blessing and cursing (vv. 9–12).

The intervening verses (vv. 6–8) continue the ideas of mastery over animals, and of fire, from vv. 2–5, but also introduce the ideas of impurity and uncontrollability which are then developed in vv. 9–12.

The verse we are interested in, v. 6, thus falls in the overlap section where the metaphor is most complex.

4.3 Phonological Aspect

In her discussion of the phonological aspect of parallelism,[27] Berlin defines a sound pair as '*the repetition in parallel words or lines of the same or similar consonants in any order within close proximity.*'[28] Since she is discussing Hebrew, she limits discussion to consonants. In order to distinguish significant parallelism from the repetition that is inevitable in language, she further requires that two sets of consonants must be involved, within a word or adjacent words in both lines, and that 'same or similar' be interpreted as 'the identical phonemes, an allophone (e.g., כ and ך), or two phonemes which are articulated similarly (e.g., nasals, *m* and *n*; fricatives: s and š).'[29] Some sound pairs are also semantic word pairs, but some are not, and in the latter case words which sound similar are 'drawn together in

[27] Berlin, *Dynamics*, 103–126. A phoneme is 'the minimal unit of sound in the sound system of a language'. David Crystal, *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*, 5th edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 347. An allophone is a sub-variant of a phoneme, where the difference is just a matter of context.

[28] Berlin, *Dynamics*, 104.

[29] Berlin, *Dynamics*, 105.

meaning.'[30] Like the other forms of parallelism, sound pairs can be used to form patterns.

In Greek, the limitation to consonants does not, of course, apply. However, the general principles may be carried over. There are at least four sound pairs in Jas 3.1–12:[31]

- μικρὸν μέλος and μεγάλα αὐχει (v. 5)[32]
- σπιλοῦσα ὅλον and φλογίζουσα τὸν τροχὸν (v. 6)
- τῆς γενέσεως and τῆς γεέννης (v. 6)[33]
- ἁλυκὸν and γλυκὺ (v. 12, which also participates, with the preceding συκῆ ἐλαίας ποιῆσαι ἢ ἄμπελος σῦκα, in a more complex repetition of σ, κ, λ, and π).

Phonological patterning may be present in the finite verbs of Jas 3.4:

Α εἰ δὲ τῶν ἵππων τοὺς χαλινοὺς εἰς τὰ στόματα **βάλλομεν** εἰς τὸ πείθεσθαι αὐτοὺς ἡμῖν,
Β καὶ ὅλον τὸ σῶμα αὐτῶν **μετάγομεν**
Β′ ἰδοὺ καὶ τὰ πλοῖα τηλικαῦτα ὄντα καὶ ὑπὸ ἀνέμων σκληρῶν ἐλαυνόμενα, **μετάγεται**
Α′ ὑπὸ ἐλαχίστου πηδαλίου ὅπου ἡ ὁρμὴ τοῦ εὐθύνοντος **βούλεται**

5. Implications for James 3.6

The identification of parallelism in Jas 3.2–12 does not, as has already been noted, mean that it should all be set out as poetic lines on the page. On the one hand, even in Hebrew, there is a continuum between prose and poetry, a spectrum of more or less elevated

---

[30] Jakobson cited by Berlin. In Berlin's words, 'phonologic similarity or equivalence promotes the perception of semantic equivalence.' Berlin, *Dynamics*, 111–2.

[31] Johnson also notes alliteration of p- in v. 2, and the repetition of ἰδοὺ in vv. 4–5 and ἐν αὐτῇ in v. 9. Some of the cases he lists as alliteration Berlin would probably classify as syntactic or semantic parallelism. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Epistle of James: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 37A; New York: Doubleday, 1995), 254.

[32] Noted as a 'nice alliteration' by Davids (Davids, *James*, 140).

[33] This 'balance' is noted by Johnson, *James*, 260.

language. On the other hand, according to Greek notions of poetry, which are metrical, Jas 3.1–12 would not even begin to qualify.

However, the generally elevated nature of the language in this passage, and its slightly Semitic flavor, may be of relevance to the exegesis of its most difficult verse, 3.6. The combination of terseness, imagery and parallelism that we find here would, in a Hebrew text, be indicative of poetry. Moreover, the clause lengths in v. 6 are noticeably shorter than, for instance, vv. 3-4, and are reminiscent of the two to five stress cola of Hebrew poems. 'Difficult' syntax[34] is typical rather than atypical of that genre.[35]

If we work on the hypothesis that at this point in James' discourse the 'poetic function' temporarily dominates, it may be more helpful to read the text as balanced poetic lines than to seek to describe it entirely in terms of the syntax we expect of prose.

A preliminary division might be as follows:

καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα πῦρ·
ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας ἡ γλῶσσα

(Chiasm with repetition of γλῶσσα)

καθίσταται ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν ἡμῶν
ἡ σπιλοῦσα ὅλον τὸ σῶμα

---

[34] There are 'five expressions in the nominative case but only one verb in the indicative (καθίσταται). This makes it a problem to know how to combine these different words and phrases. Moreover, several phrases are enigmatic and any proposed understanding of 3:6a has its difficulties.' Ralph P. Martin, *James*, WBC 48 (Waco: Word Books, 1988), 113.

[35] It was at one time suggested that the basic syntax of BH poetry differed completely from that of prose (Alviero Niccacci, "Analyzing Biblical Hebrew Poetry," *JSOT* 74 [1997]: 91). Although most now agree that it "differs from prose texts in its selections, but not in its grammatical system." (Eep Talstra, "Reading Biblical Hebrew Poetry – Linguistic Structure or Rhetorical Device?" *JNSL* 25/2 [1999]: 125), discourse analysis of the poetic sections of the OT has proved far more challenging that that of prose narrative. There are also plenty of examples of English poets bending the rules of prose syntax, ranging from the subtle (e.g. Gerard Manley Hopkins' 'The Windhover') to the blatant (e.g. e. e. cummings' 'anyone lived in a pretty how town').

(Semantic parallel of τοῖς μέλεσιν ἡμῶν and ὅλον τὸ σῶμα)

καὶ φλογίζουσα τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως
καὶ φλογιζομένη ὑπὸ τῆς γεέννης

(Repetition of και and verb (act/pass) and alliteration of τῆς γενέσεως / τῆς γεέννης)

The first couplet works as two nominal clauses which juxtapose two different descriptions of the tongue. On the one hand it is a fire, and the preceding verses have depicted the potential for a small spark to do great damage. On the other hand it is 'the world of unrighteousness,' an image which introduces a moral dimension (c.f. v. 2a) and moves the discussion beyond the body (c.f. v. 2b) to the individual's interaction with the world. One advantage of this reading is that it pairs off the nominatives straightforwardly in the order in which they are encountered. The article before κόσμος need not prevent ἡ γλῶσσα from being the subject of the second colon. Young notes that although when both nouns have the article, we would usually read the first as subject, this can be overridden by the fact that 'the topic the author is discussing in a discourse unit will normally be the subject.'[36] The unusual ordering may be a poetic choice. Semantically, however, the clause raises a question. How can the tongue not just interact with the sinful real world (the natural meaning of ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας[37]), but actually *be* that world, even in a metaphorical sense?

The second couplet is difficult because καθίστημι usually has either a predicate nominative, or an object in the accusative, or a prepositional phrase starting with ἐπί.[38] In this verse, there are no accusatives or prepositional phrases with ἐπί, so it would seem necessary for one of the nominatives to be the predicate. Some translations take the second ἡ γλῶσσα as the explicit subject and ὁ κόσμος as the predicate (e.g. RSV, NAB), but if we are right about the

---

[36] Richard A. Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 65. The article is common with monadic nouns. Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek*, 67.

[37] C.f. Davids, *James*, 142.

[38] BDAG, 492.

first couplet, both these noun phrases have been accounted for in the preceding nominal clause. That leaves ἡ σπιλοῦσα as the only candidate for the predicate of καθίσταται.[39]

One possible problem with this is that in 2 Pet 1.8 and Rom 5.19, the predicate adjectives following this verb do not have the article. Mayor thinks that the article rules out any suggestion that ἡ σπιλοῦσα is the predicate: 'either we should have καθίσταται σπιλοῦσα or καθίσταται τὸ σπιλοῦν (μέλος).'[40] Mayor's second alternative does, however, allow for the predicate of καθίστημι sometimes to have the article, and the feminine σπιλοῦσα (as opposed to neuter σπιλοῦν) corresponds aptly to the feminine γλῶσσα. Again, there could be poetic reasons for the choice of gender; the verse is held together by a string of feminine nouns and participles referring to the tongue, and in particular there is phonological parallelism between σπιλοῦσα ὅλον and φλογίζουσα τὸν τροχὸν. Nevertheless ἡ σπιλοῦσα, like ὁ κόσμος, is a semantically surprising phrase and raises a question. In what sense is the tongue appointed *the* polluter of the whole body?

A further problem is that καθίσταται could be either passive or middle, which raises the question of agent. The reflexive middle of non-deponent verbs is rare, and Mayor argues that the middle of καθίστημι is not attested in the NT,[41] but if the verb is passive, who or what is appointing the tongue to this devastating office of defilement?

The third couplet, as we have set it out, consists of two participial clauses with strong parallelism, expanding on ἡ σπιλοῦσα.[42] This

---

[39] Note that in this case the couplet is enjambed syntactically, and does not fit easily into Kugel's 'A what's more B' paradigm for parallelism. However, there is clear semantic parallelism between ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν ἡμῶν and ὅλον τὸ σῶμα. Alternation between enjambed and non-enjambed lines is a feature of some Hebrew poetry (e.g. Lam 3).

[40] Mayor, *St. James*, 113–114. Laws, taking the verb as reflexive, also rules out ἡ σπιλοῦσα as predicate. Sophie Laws. *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, HNTC (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 149.

[41] Mayor, *St. James*, 115–6n.

[42] Moo commends the NIV translation of the participles, which 'preserves the parallelism nicely by rendering them as indicative verbs.' (Moo, *James*, 159.) Note that the parallelism James sets up between the three feminine participles may have influenced his choice of ἡ σπιλοῦσα rather than τὸ σπιλοῦν.

couplet poses semantic rather than grammatical problems. It is not possible here to explore fully the meaning of the phrase ὁ τροχός τῆς γενέσεως, or the implications of James' use of γέεννα, but recognition of the poetic structure of the whole verse and its context in a passage of rich and overlapping metaphor, may suggest some directions for further study.

As has already been noted, τον τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως and γεέννης are drawn together, at the ends of parallel cola, by phonological parallelism. This parallelism invites us to seek both similarity and contrast in the images.[43] Moreover, since the whole of vv. 2–12 is marked by metaphor rather than explicit theological argument, it is indeed as poetic images, rather than as technical theological or philosophical terms, that we should probably view them.

The usual NT use of γέεννα as the place of final judgment (Matt 5.22–30; 10.28; 18.9; 23.33; Mark 9.43–47; Luke 12.5 c.f. Rev 20.10) does not fit the context of 3.6, because here γέεννα is the beginning rather than the end of the problem of evil. The modern use of 'hell' as a metonym for Satan, viewed as its master, is not found in the Bible.[44] Perhaps, therefore, we should look no further than the everyday Jewish use of the word to designate the Valley of Hinnom. The reason that this valley prefigured the place of final judgment was that it was a garbage heap, with a dark history of godlessness (2 Kings 23.10; 2 Chron 28.3; 33.6; Jer 7.31; 19.4, 5; 32.35), where filth burned constantly.[45] James has already used the metaphor of physical dirt for moral defilement (ῥυπαρία 1.21 c.f. 2.2, and σπιλοῦσα 3.6). He is about to add the idea of impure water coming from a tainted spring (3.11–12). Moreover, v. 6 is held together by the image of fire. Thus Jerusalem's ever-smouldering municipal garbage incinerator, a site

---

[43] 'It is the idea of contrast, perceptible opposition, that is important in the poetic function. For it is not only that parallelism involves equivalence, but that within that equivalence there is an opposition.' Berlin, *Dynamics*, 11.

[44] It has frequently been noted, however, on the basis of the Apocalypse of Abraham 14, 31 that the concept of Satan as the present inhabitant of hell was already known. See for example Davids, *James*, 149. If this referent is intended, however, the metaphorical image remains that of the garbage heap.

[45] A possible parallel to James' usage is Mt 23.15, if γέεννα can be read in that verse as relating to the evil of the Pharisees and their proselytes rather than to their coming judgment.

chosen for the purpose because of the moral defilement of its past, is a metaphor apt to the context.

The phrase ὁ τροχός τῆς γενέσεως had a technical meaning in pagan Greek philosophy, just as γέεννα did in Jewish theology, but again this can hardly be the meaning James intends. James was no believer in reincarnation. Taking it at face value, the image perhaps has the connotations of a never-ending circle, and of the way things are in the real world (c.f. τὸ πρόσωπον τῆς γενέσεως, Jas 1.23). [46] There is phonological parallelism not only to the following γέεννης but also between φλογίζουσα τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως and the preceding ἡ σπιλοῦσα ὅλον τὸ σῶμα; just as the tongue stains the whole body, so it ignites the whole of existence. In the three couplets of this verse, James has moved from the world (ὁ κόσμος) to the body (ὅλον τὸ σῶμα, linking back to v. 2 at the beginning of the section) and back again to the world. As with γέεννά ὁ τροχός τῆς γενέσεως hints at perpetuity.

Thus the two phrases have both a similarity (the idea of endless process) and a difference (source of ignition v. recipient of ignition). The contrast of igniter and ignited may shed light on the surprising definite nouns in the first and second couplets. The tongue is 'the world of unrighteousness' and 'the polluter of the body' in that it is the unique conduit through which defilement spreads to the whole of life.[47] The idea of ignition also completes the parallel between the earlier 'small but powerful' metaphors of the bit and the rudder, and that of the spark. The bit is put in the horse's mouth by a rider, and a helmsman turns the rudder that steers the ship (vv. 3–4). Only at the end of v. 6 do we discover what ignites the spark that causes the forest fire (v. 5).

That the metaphorical igniter of this spark is not a human being points forward to the second block of metaphors. In vv. 7–12, linked

---

[46] This is true whether τροχος is accented as on the last syllable (meaning wheel) or the first (meaning 'course' or 'round'). Moo says that although in pagan religions τροχός, 'wheel,' had the idea of a cycle of reincarnation from which to seek release, it 'was fairly widely used among Jews in the Hellenistic period to characterize the regular "turn" of fortune.' (Moo, *James*, 159).

[47] Note that this is poetic imagery, not a technical theological formulation.

to vv. 6–8 by γάρ,[48] James will be concerned with the tongue not as a small but powerful instrument, but as an untamable source of defilement. The hypothetical δυνατός of v. 2 is answered by a doubly emphatic οὐδεὶς δύναταὶ μὴ δύναται (vv. 8, 12). The reason why the tongue, like a fire lit by γέεννα, contaminates all of life, is that it is beyond our control.[49]

On this reading there remains, however, an evocative uncertainty about the agent of καθίσταται. If γέεννα is simply the Valley of Hinnom, used as a poetic image, it can hardly represent the personal agent of a deliberate action. The only options for agent seem to be Satan or God. If Satan is implied, that would resonate with 3.15 and 4.7. Baker, however, suggests that God is the appointee; [50] in Moo's words, 'God... for the testing of humans, has himself appointed the tongue to have this role.'[51] If Baker is right, James' earlier discussion of testing and temptation must be borne in mind (1.2, 12–15).[52] Although testing leads to life, temptation leads to death and never comes from God.[53] God may have appointed the tongue to its role of testing, but he is not the author of its 'restless evil' (3.8). On the contrary, he has provided an antidote to the 'deadly poison' (3.8) of the tongue in the form of the 'implanted word' (1.21) and 'wisdom from above' (3.17).[54]

---

[48] The logical conjunctions γάρ and διότι occur 6 times in Ch 1, 5 times in Ch 2, 3 times in Ch 3 (3.2, 7, 16), once in Ch 4 and not at all in Ch 5. The conjunction οὖν occurs three times in Ch 4 and twice in Ch5 while διό occurs once each in Ch 1 and Ch 4. Since imperative verb forms are found throughout the epistle, this suggests a transition from explanation of how we should live (Chs 1–3) to implication (Chs 4–5), with Ch 3 being less explicitly logical than Chs 1–2.

[49] An alternative way to align the metaphors would be to liken γέεννα to the 'strong winds' of v. 4. The owner of the tongue is then equivalent to the helmsman or rider, but unlike them cannot keep control.

[50] William R. Baker, *Personal Speech-Ethics in the Epistle of James*, WUNT 2.68 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1995), 126–27.

[51] Moo, James 158.

[52] Chapters 1 and 3 also share the ideas of speech (1.19), impurity (1.21), wisdom, (1.5 c.f. 3.13), and works (1.22 c.f. 3.13).

[53] This interpretation assumes that πειρασμός in 1.2, 12 refers to testing (including morally neutral suffering) but πειράζω in 1.13–14 refers to temptation to do evil.

[54] Ong, for whom the whole letter is governed by the conceptual metaphor, 'Life is a divine trial,' follows Martin in the view that the 'tongue' in 3.1–12 is itself a

We also, on this reading, have more than one option for the referent of γέεννα. It could represent the garbage tip of our own uncontrollable desires (1.14; 4.1) which tempt us, with our tongues, to pollute the world around us (φλογίζουσα τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως). Alternatively, it could represent the fallen world, which we must resist as the source of pollution (1.27, where 'unpolluted' is ἄσπιλος); it is through our tongue that our whole being is stained (ἡ σπιλοῦσα ὅλον τὸ σῶμα). In prose, we would strive to choose one referent and exclude the other. In poetry, perhaps we can allow for polysemy. Is it even perhaps a part of James' point that these two referents are inseparable? The rich possibilities of the metaphor indicate that we are still a long way from mastering the meaning of James 3.6.

Conclusion

The recognition of 'heightened speech' in Jas 3 is not new. This article has argued, however, that in Jas 3.6 poetic function temporarily dominates normal syntax, and semantics is governed almost entirely by overlapping metaphors, rather than by technical terms. Reading the verse in this way does not solve all the exegetical problems but it does perhaps open up some new perspectives on one of the most difficult verses in the NT.

These perspectives can be shown to be in harmony with the wider context of the epistle. Firstly, our study of parallelism and of metaphor has led us to locate 3.6 within 3.2–12, and then to view this whole passage as a coherent and carefully structured composition. Possibly 3.1–12 should be added to Halson's list of 'longer discourses' in James.[55] Secondly, our interpretation has maintained awareness of the frequent connections between 3.1–12 and 1.1–27 (especially 1.12–27), connections which are important to the overall structure proposed by Davids.[56]

---

metaphor for teachers and the 'body' a metaphor for the church. On this reading, God is the obvious subject of καθίσταται; the shock is not so much who appoints the teachers as the outcome, or even purpose, of the appointment. S. H. Ong, *A Strategy for a Metaphorical Reading of the Epistle of James* (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1996), 92–99.

[55] C.f. McCartney, 'Wisdom,' 54.

[56] Davids, *James*, 27.

A tentative paraphrase, on the basis of the study so far, might be as follows:

The tongue is a fire;
the unrighteous world is the tongue!
It is appointed among our members
the polluter of the whole body,
Both igniting the ongoing round of life
and ignited by the smouldering ground of defilement.[57]

As for the remaining exegetical uncertainties, if the verse is perceived as poetic, we shall be more tolerant of ambiguity. Ambiguity that would be problematic in prose is characteristic, and even a deliberate strategy, of poetry and metaphor.[58] That there is more than one way of deciphering the syntax, or of identifying the referents of the metaphors, or even of dividing the verse into balanced lines, need not be a hindrance to poetic communication and may even be a help. James obliges us to dwell over the passage, reading and rereading it, and the more we do so the more strongly his basic warning hits home, even if we still cannot resolve all the details. Arguably, the ambiguity of the poetic language serves to disambiguate the theological message by saying the same thing in multiple mutually reinforcing ways. Beware the tongue!

SARAH-JANE AUSTIN
London

[57] One of the inadequacies of such a paraphrase is that only the proper name Gehenna can capture accurately the historical as well as the everyday associations of the place. If James expected his readers to know about the early and spring rains for Palestine (5.7), and the stories of Abraham and Rahab (Ch 2), he would certainly have expected them to know Gehenna's history.

[58] Berlin, *Dynamics*, 96–99.