Wisdom and the Tongue: a study in *James*

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HON 205: WISDOM
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James the Just

A wool-wearing, non-shaving, non-bathing, vegetarian teetotaler whose knees were like “those of a camel” from praying.
James the Just

- Brother of Jesus and Jude (Matt. 13:55, Jude 1, Mark 6:3)
- Initially doubted Jesus’ identity (John 7:5)
- Appeared to by risen Christ (I Corinthians 15:7)
- Received news of Peter’s escape from prison (Acts 12:17)
- Visited in Jerusalem by Paul (Galatians 1:19)
- Described as “pillar” of the Jerusalem church (Gal. 2:9)
- Played leading role in Jerusalem council (Acts 15:13-ff)
- Leader in Jerusalem church from 44-62 A.D.
- Martyrdom in Jerusalem – 62 A.D.
James: What is Wisdom?

The Problem

- *James* – clearly within a wisdom genre
- However, “wisdom” is mentioned only 4 times
  - 1:5 “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God . . .”
  - 3:13 “Who is wise . . . let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.”
  - 3:15 “This is not the wisdom that comes down from above . . .”
  - 3:17 “But the wisdom from above is first pure . . .”
- Wisdom is never explicitly defined
James: What is Wisdom?

- Wisdom (in *James*) = a capacity for vision/seeing
  - The capacity for grasping (understanding, apprehending) our current, temporal, material circumstances (1:9-11) in light of eternal, transcendent realities (1:17-18).
  - This wisdom enables us to grasp “trials” (or tests) properly.
    - A. We will grasp what they produce (1:2-4)
    - B. We will grasp their source (1:12-15)

- Wisdom is thus a capacity to situate oneself in the trajectory of life so as to move toward perfection and completeness (“lacking in nothing” – 1:4)
James: The Case for Wisdom as Vision

- **Literary Clues (images)**
  - **Movement of integration**
    - Trials/testing ⇒ perseverance ⇒ maturity (1:2-4)
    - Athletic race ⇒ crown of life (1:12)
    - Birth ⇒ firstfruits (1:18)
  - **Movement of disintegration**
    - Wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind (1:6)
    - Flower/grass withering and dying in the sun (1:10-11)
    - Disordered desire ⇒ sin ⇒ death (1:15)

- Such images aim at getting readers to *see* things in a particular way.
The nature of God as giver

1:5 – “God, who gives generously . . .”
- Greek: “singly” – image = with one eye
- Contrast: “double-minded man” (1:8) – lit: two-souled
- Contrast: “A gift from the fool will do you no good. For his gaze is divided, sevenfold.” (Sirach 20:14)

1:17 – “Father of lights . . .”
- Light illuminates, darkness deceives (1:16)
- The eternal stability of the heavenly lights (“no variation or shadow due to change”) provides a permanent backdrop against which one can rightly apprehend the variation that accompanies one’s temporal, material circumstances
James: What is Wisdom’s Telos?

- **Perfection (1:4)**
  - Conformity to the nature of the Giver of wisdom
    - Matt. 5:48 – “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”
    - **Singles**ness of devotion not two-souled
    - Steadfastness (1:3-4, 5:11) – no variation or change (1:17)
    - “pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere” (3:17)
      - List is illustrative, not exhaustive
    - Like Father like son (“visit orphans and widows” 1:27)

- **Glory**
  - “crown of life” (1:12), “firstfruits of his creatures” (1:18)
James: How Does One Obtain Wisdom?

- The “obvious” answer
  - “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God . . .” (1:5)
- Implication of the “obvious” answer
  - Wisdom = gift
    - God “who gives generously” (1:5)
    - Wisdom “comes down from above” (3:15)
  - Wisdom cannot be seized
- Problem with the “obvious” answer
  - We don’t know how to ask (4:2-3); we are double-minded (4:8)
- So, how do we create the conditions in which the receipt of the gift of wisdom is possible? (1:21)
Bridle the Tongue!

• “And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man.” (3:2)
• “But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.” (5:12)
Centrality of Fitting-Speech in James

- 1:5-8 – Asking for wisdom
- 1:9-10 – Boasting
- 1:13 – Not saying
  - “I am being tempted by God.”
- 1:19 – Be slow to speak
- 1:26 – Bridle the tongue
- 2:1-7 – Expressing partiality
- 2:12 – Speak as judged by law
- 2:14, 18 – Professing faith w/out works
- 3:1-12 – The tongue!
- 4:2-3 – Failure in right-asking
- 4:9 – Repentant speech
- 4:11 – Don’t speak evil
- 4:13-16 – Don’t boast about future
- 5:1 – Repentant speech
- 5:12 – Don’t swear (truthful speech)
- 5:13-20 – Speech of Christian community
  - Pray for sick (v. 13, 14, 15, 16)
  - Sing praise (v. 13)
  - Confess sins (v. 15, 16)
  - Prayer of the righteous (v. 16-17)
  - Admonition/correction (v. 19-20)
James 3:2-12

- The weightiness of the tongue’s position (3:3-5a)

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<tr>
<th>Guide</th>
<th>“Fulcrum”</th>
<th>Guided</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charioteer</td>
<td>Bit</td>
<td>Horse</td>
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<td>Pilot</td>
<td>Rudder</td>
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The power of the tongue (as “fulcrum”) is disproportional to its size.

- The wellspring of the tongue’s power (3:5b-12)
  - “. . . set on fire by hell.” (3:6)
Summary of *James* on Wisdom

- Controlling the tongue is the totality of the moral life and the key to creating the necessary conditions for the reception of the gift of wisdom.

- Wisdom is the key to perfection (1:4-5); therefore, perfection depends upon control of the tongue.

- Major implication . . .
  - If you can’t control your speech, you will never become wise; hence, you will never become spiritual mature.
Really?
The Biblical Priority of Speech/Words

- God creates by means of the word.
- Sin enters the cosmos by a lie.
- God initiates salvation history with a call.
- God establishes his covenant and leads his people with the words of the law and the prophets.
- God inaugurates the culmination of redemption history in the incarnation of his Son, the Word.
- God establishes and grows his church on the basis of the preaching of the Gospel.
- God seals the mystery of his eschatological purposes in the prophetic words of a book.
“Death and life are in the power of the tongue . . .” (18:21)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mouth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lips</td>
<td>33</td>
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<td>Tongue</td>
<td>19</td>
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No neutral speech in Proverbs . . .
- Righteous/wicked, wise/fools, truth/deceit, blessing/ruin
Abba Pambo asked Abba Anthony, “What ought I to do?” and the old man said to him, “Do not trust in your own righteousness, do not worry about the past, but control your tongue and your stomach.”
Another brother questioned him in these words: ‘What does, “See that none of you repays evil for evil” mean?’ (I Thess. 5:15) The old man said to him, ‘Passions work in four stages – first, in the heart; secondly, in the face; thirdly, in words; and fourthly, it is essential not to render evil for evil in deeds. If you can purify your heart, passion will not come into your expression; but if it comes into your face, take care not to speak; but if you do speak, cut the conversation short in case you render evil for evil.’
Abba Sisoes expressed himself freely one day, saying, ‘Have confidence: for thirty years I have not prayed to God about my faults, but I have made this prayer to him: “Lord Jesus, save me from my tongue,” and until now every day, I fall because of it, and commit sin.’
More Sayings of the Desert Fathers

• It was said of Abba Agathon that for three years he lived with a stone in his mouth, until he had learnt to keep silence.

• Abba Gregory said, ‘These three things God requires of all the baptized: right faith in the heart, truth on the tongue, temperance in the body.’

• Abba Or said to his disciple Paul, ‘Be careful never to let an irrelevant word come into this cell.’
  ○ They said of Abba Or that he never lied, nor swore, nor hurt anyone, nor spoke without necessity.
A brother asked Abba Tithoes, ‘How should I guard my heart?’ The old man said to him, ‘How can we guard our hearts when our mouths and our stomachs are open?’

[Abba Hyperechius] said ‘He who does not control his tongue when he is angry, will not control his passions either.’

Abba Joseph said to Abba Nisterus, ‘What should I do about my tongue, for I cannot control it?’ The old man said to him, ‘When you speak, do you find peace?’ He replied ‘No.’ The old man said, ‘If you do not find peace, why do you speak? Be silent and when a conversation takes place, it is better to listen than to speak.’
“Woe is me! For I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips . . .”
(Isaiah 6:5)