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THE BOOK OF JAMES IN LIGHT OF FIRST CENTURY SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC TENSIONS[1]

The book of James, one of the so-called General Epistles, received slow acceptance into the canon of the Christian Bible,[2] perhaps as a result of its strong affinity to Hebrew wisdom literature.[3] But because its composition and overall theme has been misconstrued, the matter of the book of James must be stated in diametric terms.[4] The book of James does not have anything to do with a dispute between James and Paul over faith versus works. The book of James is not an unrelated compilation of Christian proverbs. The book of James is not a tractate or collection

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[1]Scripture quotations unless indicated otherwise are from NRSV for English translations and Brown and Comfort (1990) for Greek NT.

[2]Souter (1954), 175, says, "The Western Church is absolutely silent about this Epistle till the second half of the fourth century." Kummel (1966), 285, states, "It is never quoted by Tertullian, Cyprian, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus. Not until after 200 do definite traces of James appear in Palestine and Egypt. . . . In the Greek Church, however, James was generally recognized since the Synod of Laodicea (360) and Athanasius. In the West the earliest witness is the Codex Corbeiensis, which produces an old Latin translation from the fourth century." Cf. Guthrie (1970), 736ff.; Mayor (1990), 84ff.; McNeile (1953), 352ff.; Salmon (1904), 448ff. See also the section on the historical development of NT canon in Du Toit (1979), 171ff.

[3]Dunn (1990), 251, says, "The letter of James is the most Jewish, the most undistinctively Christian document in the New Testament. . . . The faith he gives expression to is one which seeks to live according to the teaching of Jesus within a wholly Jewish framework of belief and practice–Christian at significant points but more characteristically Jewish in sum." This view, though, sees the message of James in a doctrinal rather than a socioeconomic context. Cf. Oesterley (1970), 392ff.; and Johnson (2009), 164, who thinks the short letter "may well have been written to Jewish members in the first decades of the messianic movement," but he also overviews the message of James in a doctrinal or theological context (e.g., James versus Paul on the matter of righteousness).

[4]The style or genre of the book of James has been argued excessively. Is it a letter, a tractate, a compilation of "sayings" or "maxims" (e.g., a book of Christian proverbs)? Some have suggested that James wrote in the spirit of the Hebrew prophets and strung together a series of "burden apostrophes." Others think he patterned his work after the Greek "diatribe."

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of wise sayings that reflects many different themes about Christian living.[5] The book of James is, however, a written message in very good Greek from presumably the brother of Jesus to his Jewish-Christian compatriots in Judea and throughout the Roman world.[6] The message is about the extreme pressures being faced by Jewish believers, both in Judea and elsewhere during the middle decades of the first century, due to social and economic disparities.[7] James calls on his readers (i.e., hearers) in the synagogues to have patience, to show restraint, and to persevere against both the abuses of the rich and powerful and the reaction of those who would respond

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[5]Contra Conzelmann and Lindemann (1988), 267, who see in James a lack of any "fixed structure" with "paraenetic elements and wisdom sayings . . . loosely strung together" and "no orderly arrangement and no continuous sequence of thought." Cf. Kummel (1966), 284; Lake and Lake (1937), 164; McNeile (1953), 201.

[6]There are five individuals in NT who are called "James": (1) James, the son of Zebedee (Mark 1.19; 3.17; Acts 12.2); (2) James, the son of Alphaeus (Mark 3.18); (3) James, the younger (Mark 15.40), son of one called Mary (Mark 16.1); (4) James, the father of the apostle Judas, not Iscariot (Luke 6.16; Acts 1.13); and (5) James, son of Joseph and Mary, brother of Jesus (Matthew 13.55; Mark 6.3; Acts 12.17; 15.13; 21.18; 1 Corinthians 15.7; Galatians 1.19; 2.9, 12; Jude 1; cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.9.1; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23). Kummel (1966), 290, states, "In primitive Christianity there was only one James who was so well known and who assumed such a transcending position that his mere name would identify him sufficiently, James the brother of the Lord." Cf. Koester (1982), Volume Two, 156-157, who says, "The authority which is claimed for this writing is, no doubt, James, the brother of the Lord. . . . [Thus] the Epistle of James is an important witness for the continuation of the Jewish-Christian tradition of the Jerusalem church in the Greek-speaking world."

[7]Several dates for the writing of James, if written by the brother of the Lord, have been conjectured: (1) before the crisis about observances of Mosaic law, between AD 49 and 51; (2) after the writing of Romans, about AD 58; (3) right before the death of James (the traditional date), about AD 62; or (4) before the fall of Jerusalem, about AD 65 to 68 (with a later date for the death of James). Those who do not believe the writing is from the brother of the Lord have a much wider window for its date. For example, Robinson (1976), 118-119, notes, "The epistle of James is one of those apparently timeless documents that could be dated almost anywhere and which has indeed been placed at practically every point in the list of New Testament writings. Thus Zahn and Harnack, writing in the same year, 1897, put it first and last but one–at an interval of nearly a hundred years!"

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with violence.[8] Read the short book of James through in one sitting in an English translation without headings.[9] Then read the book through once again. And read the book completely a third time. Pay attention to the writer's emphasis on the necessity of trials and testing with regard to social and economic inequities. Notice the antithesis of the rich versus those who are poor in how he begins, what he highlights, and how he concludes.[10] A holistic understanding of the message of James reveals that he is speaking to communities that are oppressed by the rich and powerful, and these communities are being torn apart by those who want to placate their oppressors and those who want to retaliate with hatred and violence.[11]

James speaks from his background as a son of Abraham and, more importantly, as a brother and follower of Jesus the Lord. As he easily moves from one point to the next, he draws from the common stock of Jewish wisdom that is understood and accepted by many of his fellow

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[8]For an older statement of the general poverty of the Jewish-Christian communities of Palestine and Syria (i.e., the primary recipients of the writing), see Godot (1873), 226-230. Cf. "Social Stratification in the First Century A.D." in Maynard-Reid (1987), 13-23; "Social Classes" in Greco-Roman society in Bell (1998), 186-197; and Jeremias (1969), 87ff., on the rich, the middle class, and the poor in first-century Jerusalem. See too Fiensy (2014), 6ff., on the economic structure of Galilean society and the various social groups.

[9]For example, Lattimore (1996) or Tyndale (1989).

[10]The view that James uses a disjointed style overlooks this unifying theme of the book, that is, the folly and vanity of riches (1.9-11), the oppression of poor believers by the wealthy (2.5-7), the disruption and even violence caused by greed (4.1-4), and the condemnation of rich people and their material possessions (5.1-6). In this judgment of wealth and riches, James follows the lead of the OT prophets and Jesus. What is unclear is whether James uses a chiastic structure in presenting his critique of wealth and the rich oppressors of Jewish (and Gentile) Christians, or if he crescendos the theme about rich people and their oppression of others to his wholesale condemnation of their actions and what they own (5.1ff).

[11]Cf. the chapter on socioeconomic background in Adamson (1989), 228ff.

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believers.[12] He is the great sage, the respected patriarch, and the brother of the Lord.[13] Like his brother the Lord, we can imagine a multitude encircled about him, perhaps in Jerusalem during the festival of Passover or Pentecost, as he reflects on the application of "the royal law"[14] to the current situation. Or, it may be that he is sitting and speaking to a smaller group of disciples. The exact immediate audience does not matter. His words are heard and written down by his direction and sent out with those who have come to the festival and will return to their home synagogues elsewhere in the Roman Empire.[15] His style is conversational. Rather than a disjointed collection of sayings, this message has the mark of verbal communication by a prophetic voice.[16] If only we could hear the inflection of his voice on certain words and passages, then we would understand better his overall and consistent message about right living during wrong circumstances.

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[12]See chapters 3 and 4 in Mayor (1990), 103ff., 128ff.; Carson (2007), 997ff.; also "Poor and Rich in Christian and Jewish Literature" in Maynard-Reid (1987), 24-37.

[13]See McGiffert (1897), 549ff., on James and the Church of Jerusalem.

[14]James 2.8; cf. his use of *nomos* ("law"; 1.25; 2.9, 10, 11, 12; 4.11) and *nomothetes* ("lawgiver"; 4.12; only here in NT).

[15]The letter is sent "to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (1.1; NIV). Is this a reference to Jews, Jewish Christians, or Christians in general (e.g., both Jews and Gentiles as the "new Israel")? After his discussion of the addressees, Guthrie (1970), 761, notes, "To sum up, it seems better to regard the letter as addressed to Jewish Christians, but the alternative view that Christians generally may be in mind has much to be said for it." Worthy of note, James uses both *sunagoge* ("synagogue"; 2.2) and *ekklesia* ("assembly"; 5.14) one time each in his writing. On the geography of the Jewish Diaspora, see Pfeiffer (1949), 166ff.; Schurer (1998), Second Division, Volume II, 220ff.; see also Guignebert (1959), 211-237; Lietzmann (1961), Volume I, 75-103; and Robert A. Kraft, "Jews on the World Scene," in Benko and O'Rourke (1971), 81ff.

[16]McGiffert (1897), 446, notes that James "bears in reality more the character of a homily than of an epistle." Cf. Goodspeed (1937), 287ff., on James as a sermon, although he believes the book "reflects no definite situation, so it is not a letter."

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This point needs to be emphasized and perhaps lends itself to the view that the book's structure is similar to a Greek diatribe. Although not a diatribe in the classical sense, the message of James can be viewed in the modern sense as "a harangue, an abusively argumentative speech"[17] against riches and the oppression of the poor by the wealthy. On this judgmental or censorial aspect of the message of James, F. J. Foakes-Jackson comments:

> This remarkable man seems to have resembled the Baptist rather than his divine Kinsman. His epistle is an echo of the prophetic age, abounding with denunciations of wealth and luxury, of greed for gain and forgetfulness of God. At the same time it gives us many indications of the character of the Church of Jerusalem. Most of its members were very poor and greatly harassed by the wealthy Sadducees, who dragged them before the judges and blasphemed the good name by which they were called. Their assemblies were styled synagogues. In cases of illness they sent for the elders, who made use of oil to heal the sick. Though the epistle probably belongs to a later date than the beginning of the history of the Faith, it no doubt represents the condition of the early Church when it was a Jewish community.[18]

James clearly condemns the abuses of the poor by wealthy oppressors. But since the writing is sent out to communities beset by such divisive circumstances, it is carefully crafted by James to avoid taking sides among those who are being oppressed, except the side of righteous wisdom, peaceful reconciliation, and proper care for the poor and the needy. And if James intended his message for Jewish communities in general (i.e., not strictly to those who accepted Jesus as Messiah), then his sending out of this message in a written format would have an evangelistic motive as well.

The immediate situation that James writes about may be the social and political unrest against Roman authority and its legates in Judea that had been problematic for a long time (i.e.,

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[17]Soulen and Soulen (2001), 47-48.

[18]Foakes-Jackson (1924), 31-32. See too Friesen (2005), 241ff., on economic inequality in the Roman empire and the prophetic critique in the letter of James.

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since Pompey's siege of Jerusalem, 63 BC).[19] This incursion of Roman hegemony and the resulting annexation of many lands throughout Judea and Syria caused Jewish peasants and small farmers to become landless due to egregious practices by landlords and high taxes by local rulers.[20] As a result, the economic and social despoiling of the poor by the rich had seethed for decades and eventually gave way to open resistance and violence.[21] Craig Keener explains:

> In the first century, many peasants worked as tenants on larger, feudal estates (as elsewhere in the empire); others became landless day laborers in the marketplaces, finding work only sporadically (more was available in harvest season). Resentment against aristocratic landlords ran high in many parts of the empire, but nonpayment of promised goods to them was hardly an option; a few landowners even had their own hit squads of hired assassins to deal with uncooperative tenants. The situation was less extreme in the cities, but even there the divisions were obvious (e.g., the aristocracy in

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[19]Horsley (2005), 7, observes, "The Roman takeover of Palestine in 63 BCE and their imposition of Herod as king in 40 BCE meant that the Galilean, Samaritan, and Judean peasants were suddenly subject to three layers of rulers and their respective demands for revenues: tribute to Rome, taxes to Herod, and tithes and offerings to the Temple and priesthood." For the political history of Palestine and Judaism from 63 BC to the destruction of Jerusalem, see Koester (1982), Volume One, 390ff.; cf. Mayor (1990), 152ff.; also illustrations and maps with comments in Beitzel (2006), 392ff., and Brisco (1998), 198ff., 258ff. For the bungling of affairs in the region by the Roman procurators from AD 44 to 66, see Schurer (1973), Volume I, 455ff.; cf. Pfeiffer (1949), 38-40; Stambaugh and Balch (1986), 26-28. See too Mason (1992), 100-113.

[20]On the economic impact of taxation, acts of charity, pilgrim traffic, and disasters for this period in Jerusalem, see Jeremias (1969), 124ff. For the first-century Galilean economy and issues concerning its fluctuation and differentiation, see Fiensy and Hawkins (2013); also chapters 4 and 5 in Fiensy (2014), 67-97. On the lending of money and tax collecting, cf. Stambaugh and Balch (1986), 72-73. For finances of the Roman world in general, see chapter by William White, Jr., "Finances," in Benko and O'Rourke (1971), 218ff. Cf. section on protocols of social prominence in Longenecker (2020), 119ff. See also Appendix One at end of paper.

[21]In his brief historiography of "the Great Revolt against Rome," Cohen (1986), 43-44, on the basis of the work of Dyson (1971), lists four aspects of native revolts in the Roman Empire: (1) "landless peasants often figure prominently in native revolts"; (2) "native revolts frequently were led by members of the local nobility who had grievances of their own against the Romans which obviously differed from those of the peasants"; (3) "extortive Roman taxation frequently was to blame for native revolts"; and (4) "in addition to social and economic difficulties, religious 'messianic' speculations occasionally fueled native revolts." Cohen argues that "the revolt of 66-74 C.E. and, to some extent, the revolt of Bar Kokkba as well, fit the pattern."

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> Jerusalem's Upper City versus the poor living downwind of that city's sewers). When the aristocratic priests began to withhold tithe income from the poorer priests, their only means of support, economic tensions increased.
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> In Rome, grain shortages often led to rioting. Social and economic tensions in Palestine were contained longer but eventually yielded to violence. Pursuing peace with Rome through practical politics, the Jerusalem aristocracy became an object of hatred to Zealots and other elements of resistance, who felt that God alone should rule the land.[22]

By the mid-60s AD, this social and economic ferment erupted in the revolt that brought about the war with Rome and the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.[23] Archaeologist David A. Fiensy highlights the "social eruption in protest of debts" especially in the mob action in Jerusalem in AD 66, led by the Sicarii, in burning the debt records in the public archives. In the years leading up to the war, he notes:

> Judea experienced ubiquitous peasant anger. Since such outbreaks mark only the boiling point in a gradually heating cauldron of dissatisfaction over spreading indebtedness, it is likely that the problem had existed for some time. The Sicarii knew well of this resentment and directed the rage of the mob toward the archives and the hated documents of indebtedness. A plausible conclusion, then, is that Judea, like many of the Greek cities in the Hellenistic period . . . saw more and more peasants burdened by debt, at least in the decade or two before the war.[24]

And in his section on the conditions within the communities to whom James writes, Donald Guthrie states:

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[22]Keener (2014), 669-670. See also Clarence L. Lee, "Social Unrest and Primitive Christianity," in Benko and O'Rourke (1971), 121ff. Cf. Novak (2002), 20, on the disturbance in Rome (i.e., Acts 18.2; AD 49) described by Suetonius (*Claudius* 25.4).

[23]For a thorough discussion about antecedents, circumstances, and causes of the revolt, see Mason (2016), 199-280; cf. "the road to destruction" (i.e., 37 BCE to 70 AD) in Goodman (2007), 379-423.

[24]"Assessing the Economy of Galilee in the Late Second Temple Period," in Fiensy and Hawkins (2013), 171-172.

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> The oppressors are wealthy landowners, who, after the siege of Jerusalem, virtually ceased to exist in Judea,[25] to which district the Epistle is generally thought to have been sent. It was evidently a pressing social evil for the wealthy to extort from the poor and to live luxuriously on the proceeds, a condition of affairs which is well attested in the period leading up to the siege. Certainly the position described in James v.1-6 would well fit this period. . . . [And] the rather abrupt reference to "wars and fightings" (iv.1) would have been highly relevant to the explosive conditions of internecine strife in the period just before the siege of Jerusalem.[26]

If this is the pressing and troubling situation that James is writing about, then his harsh words for the rich and their abuse of the poor are quite understandable.[27]

The Jewish War of AD 66-74 resembled in many ways the Maccabean struggle for liberty from political and religious domination a few generations earlier (ca. 167-164 BC). Shaye J. D.

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[25]Hengel (1989), 41, says, "The fearful catastrophe of the First Jewish War in 66-70 CE violently destroyed an independent and flourishing Jewish-Hellenistic culture, involving a not inconsiderable part of the population, which had its own stamp, differing from that of the Jewish centres of the Diaspora. . . . This special Jewish-Hellenistic culture of the Judean metropolis was, as it were, 'decapitated' by the break-away from Rome, which was disastrous in every respect, and led to terrible consequences."

[26]Guthrie (1970), 746. Cf. Keener (2014), 670, who says, "James addresses especially Jewish Christians (and probably any other Jews who would listen) caught up in the sort of social tensions that eventually produced the war of A.D. 66-70. Although the situation most explicitly fits James's own in Judea, it also addresses the kinds of social tensions that were spreading throughout the Roman world (1.1). During the Judean war of 66-70, Rome violently discarded three emperors in a single year (A.D. 69), and immediately after the Judean war resistance fighters continued to spread their views to Jews in North Africa and Cyprus. But as in the case of some other general epistles, this letter reflects especially the situation of the writer more than that of any potential readership elsewhere."

[27]On reconstruction of political, religious, and socioeconomic events from the death of James the apostle (ca. AD 42) to the death of James the brother of the Lord (ca. AD 62), see Reicke (1974), 212-217. Cf. Keener (2014), 392-393; Mason (1992), 175ff. See also the assessment of Price and Thonemann (2010), 284, that "the revolts were not merely protests against Roman maltreatment, but aimed at the establishment of an independent, self-governing Jewish state centered on Jerusalem. On both occasions [i.e., in 66 and the revolt in 132], the rebel Jewish state minted silver and bronze coinage with aggressively nationalist inscriptions in the Hebrew language: 'Jerusalem Is Holy', 'Freedom Of Zion', 'For The Redemption of Zion'." On coinage, cf. Goodman (2007), 14-15, 398, 465-468.

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Cohen, who sets both revolts in the broader framework of Jewish resistance to Gentile subjugation (e.g., 587 BC until AD 1948), emphasizes the extreme divisiveness in Judea during the first century. He writes:

> The revolutionaries who fomented this war and saw it to its catastrophic conclusion consisted of diverse groups, each with its own leaders, history, and ideology. Some hailed from the countryside, others from the city of Jerusalem. Some were priests, others laypeople. Some were wealthy, others poor. Some had socialist or utopian goals and spent most of their energy in attacking the rich and the hereditary aristocracy. Others, notably some of the priests, fought to maintain and expand their traditional prerogatives and power. Yet others were motivated by an intense hatred of the Romans and a desire to rid the Holy Land of foreign contagion. Many of the revolutionaries believed that the messiah would soon come to redeem Israel and that all the Jews had to do was get the ball rolling; God and the angelic hosts would do the rest. We may assume that the messianic theories motivating the revolutionaries were as numerous and diverse as the revolutionaries themselves. The Zealots and the Sicarii are the best known of these groups, but there were many others.
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> One of the major reasons the Jews lost the war is that they were unable to mount a unified front against the Romans. They spent much of their time killing each other rather than fighting the enemy. Thus both the Maccabean revolution and the war of 66-74 were motivated in part by social factors, but the war party of the rebellion against Epiphanes was far more united than the war party of the rebellion against Nero.
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> . . . In the eyes of the revolutionaries, Roman rule was as oppressive and intolerable as that of Epiphanes, but many Jews disagreed with this assessment and participated in the war only in its initial chaotic stages, if at all. For every peasant willing to give up everything to fight the Romans there was a peasant who did not want to suffer the inevitable disasters inflicted by war. Fighting against the Romans was foolish at best and sinful at worst. God will redeem Israel by sending the messiah, and Israel can do nothing to hasten the appointed time. This point of view was advanced by Flavius Josephus in his work *Jewish War*, our major source for the history of the war and its antecedents. The same perspective is ascribed by rabbinic literature to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, who is alleged to have left Jerusalem during the siege and to have hailed Vespasian as a man destined to destroy the temple and to become emperor.[28]

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[28]Cohen (2014), 23-24. Cf. summaries by Sachar (1964), 115ff., and Schweitzer (1971), 31ff. For overviews of the Jewish War with Rome (AD 66-74), see Schurer (1973), Volume I, 484ff.; Goodman (2018), 100ff.; the summary of Josephus' *Bellum Judaicum* by Foakes-Jackson (1978), 181ff.; and the detailed archaeological evidence and interpretation by Meyers and Chancey (2012), 139ff. For the most recent work on this crisis in Jewish history, see especially Mason (2016); and the historiography by Goodman (2019), 135-140.

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Compare Cohen's assessment to the statement by Roberta L. Harris in her section 'The Turbulent Years': "Judaea in the first and second centuries AD was not a peaceful province of Rome. Enormous tensions between the populace, for the most part observant Jews, and their insensitive or corrupt Roman governors prompted two explosions."[29] J. B. Bury relates that while the first "explosion" or insurrection did not break out until AD 66, it had been stirring for twenty-two years (i.e., since AD 44, when Agrippa I died).[30] Due to the mismanagement and leniency of the Roman authorities and worthless demands by the Jewish aristocracy, the Zealots were able to stir up the populace for war. Bury sums up, "War against Rome was preached in the streets; miracles and prophecies were the order of the day; the Zealots of the hills were as violent as ever. There was no real grievance. It was not the case of an oppressed people rising against oppressors, or bondmen struggling for their freedom. The war was due to the fanaticism of short-sighted peasants."[31] This extreme divisiveness with its warring factions in the populace at large, something which spilled over into the religious communities of Judea and Syria, certainly weighed heavy on the hearts of Jewish-Christian leaders in Jerusalem such as James.[32]

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[29]Harris (1995), 155; cf. Murphy (2002), 281ff., on Roman rule in first-century Palestine.

[30]Cf. Trever (1939), Volume II, 482-485; and especially Goodman (2007), 379ff.

[31]Bury (1908), 366ff.; but contrast Fiensy (2014), 42-43, who observes that "most, if not all, of the groups [during the Jewish War] were led by aristocrats, priests, or teachers."

[32]On the rise and destructive beliefs and practices of the Sicarii and the Zealots, see Bruce (1972), 93-100; Cohen (2014), 163-165; Dunn (2013), 242-251; Simmons (2008), 89-97. Cf. Witherington (1998), 35-40, on dissociation of Jesus from the revolutionary or Zealot movement. Jeremias (1969), 118-119, notes for the decade of the 60s the increase in number of "idlers" or subsidized inhabitants of Jerusalem, part of the "rabble of slaves and the dregs of the population" described by Josephus, that "formed themselves into gangs and terrorized the whole city . . . and carried on the civil war within its walls." See Fiensy (2014), 9-10, on contempt of lower classes by elites. On why resistance to Roman rule in Judea was fierce, see Price and Thonemann (2010), 283-285, and their critique of Josephus.

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In his study on poverty and wealth in the book of James, Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid highlights the importance of looking at the "urban-rural relations and conflicts" in Palestine and the Roman world in general, since "this was a very important factor in the economic, cultural, and religious life of the empire and in Christianity." He says:

> A classic example of the urban-rural relations is to be found in Palestine. While the urban population was rising throughout most of the Mediterranean basin, the bulk of the population in Palestine was still rural, and its agricultural life stood boldly against the growing urbanization. Thus it is true that early Palestinian Christianity was rural in character and, like other renewal movements of the time, had its root in the hinterland and was hostile to Jerusalem.
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> The problem of the conflictual relationship between town and country in Palestine actually goes back to the beginning of the Second Commonwealth. The increased importance accorded Jerusalem during this period made the opposition between it and the rural areas very sharp. The sophisticated urban patricians of the city–with their bureaucratic, hierarchical connections and superior wealth–regarded those who followed the team and plough with pitying condescension.
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> The distinction between the urban and rural populations, however, became more pronounced in the first century, and with it followed increased antagonism. The countryside was restless, mainly because of the exploitation of the urban capitalists. The average rural person had become a client of an absentee landlord who lived in the city. This was one cause of the peasants' hatred of the city. The city was perceived to represent a specially privileged class from which the peasant felt systematically excluded.
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> Rural-urban relations in Judea finally broke down into actual warfare. One can hardly doubt that it was the rural elements that formed the most dynamic factor in the war against Rome. The Zealot party, which was representative of the Palestinian, mainly Judean, peasant piety, showed hostility toward the rich of the city, the upper priesthood of the Temple, and the foreign rulers; and the Zealots led the drive toward social change. In their overall strategy of achieving a more just order in society, they took up arms against the establishment in the first part of the first century. The Jewish War amply illustrates the tensions in the social structure in the Roman Empire during that century.[33]

If Maynard-Reid is correct in his assessment of the impetus played by urban-rural tensions in the years leading up to the war against the Romans, then it was all the more important for a notable

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[33]Maynard-Reid (1987), 22-23. However, the town versus country contrast must not be drawn too sharply, since both rich and poor lived in urban as well as rural areas. See "Did Large Estates Exist in Lower Galilee" and "Poverty and Wealth in the Jerusalem Church" in Fiensy (2014), 98-117, 145-159.

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and respected leader from urban Jerusalem, such as James, to speak out for peace and against the abuses of the rich and the violence of the revolutionaries.

In the face of these difficult circumstances (i.e., a time of temptation or trial), James admonishes disciples of Jesus to follow the guidance and teaching of their Lord. James refers to "the Lord Jesus Christ" only two times in his message (1.1; 2.1), but most commentators mention his many allusions to the teachings of Jesus.[34] It could be that James limits references to Jesus the Messiah for two reasons. First, he writes to encourage and warn all those of the Jewish faith (regardless of their Messianic beliefs), since the crisis at hand involves entire communities caught up in the growing fervor of revolt against Rome. And, he wishes to dissociate his teaching from that of radical and violent leaders, since, according to David A. Lopez, "messianic and apocalyptic traditions were deliberately exploited by the Jewish revolutionaries to gain support. . . . Because Zealots had made messianic claims about a hoped-for kingdom, it was vital that Christians differentiate their messianic claims about a hoped-for kingdom."[35]

After a token salutation (1.1), James urges his fellow Jewish Christians to recognize the goodness of God and persevere through the time of trial with joy, wisdom, and confidence by obeying his Word (1.2-27). He instructs believers to love everyone equally and not just those

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[34]See, for example, the chart in Marshall, Travis, and Paul (2011), 268. Cf. parallels with "the Sermon on the Mount" in Witherington (1998), 201-204, and what he calls the "submerged Christology" of James.

[35]Lopez (2004), 12. But note the caution of VanderKam (2003), 133, who states, "The Jewish revolts of 66-70 and 132-135 and the Diaspora uprising in 115-117 could be considered prime occasions for potential Messiahs to appear. There is really no evidence for any such claim during the first revolt. Menahem, the son of Judas the Galilean (see *War* 2.433-438), and Simon bar Giora (see *War* 7.26-36) had royal pretensions, but Josephus reports nothing regarding messianic assertions by or about them." The difference, however, may be that of a definite claim by an individual to be Messiah versus use of messianic and apocalyptic ideology that was current in Jewish thought at the time.

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who are powerful or wealthy (2.1-13). This equitable treatment of others but especially helping the needy and poor, regardless of the difficulties of doing just that, is proof of a useful faith, that is, a faith that works (2.14-26). James continues and warns against one of the greatest dangers of all during any time of divisive social turbulence–the fury of explosive and derogatory speech (3.1–4.17). James cautions leaders or teachers to watch their words, since they can sway others toward good or evil (3.1-12). He encourages use of "heavenly" wisdom, instead of "devilish" wisdom, that will bring about peace and righteousness (3.13-18). And he rails against impure motives in speech to one another and to God that results in violent conflicts and disputes (4.1-4), the enmity of God due to a lack of humility (4.5-10), the slander of other believers (4.11-12), and excessive boasting about "doing business and making money" (4.13-17).[36] Finally,[37] James returns to his opening words of exhortation and encouragement for believers under duress with his strongest condemnation of the wealthy oppressors who are the chief cause of disruption in the Jewish-Christian communities to whom he writes (5.1-20).

James is not playing games with words. What he writes about is real, not metaphorical. The situation in many communities is dire. He cries out:

> Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with

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[36]Cf. "trade and make a profit" (ESV) and "buy and sell, and make a profit" (NKJV) with NRSV rendering of James 4.13.

[37]In 4.13 and 5.1, the double "come now" (NRSV) or "now listen" (NIV), from the Greek *age nun* (only here in NT), marks the verbal transition to the conclusion of the brief message of James.

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> God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God (4.1-4).

According to James, there are "armed conflicts" (*polemoi*), and there are "fights" or "disputes" (*machai*). Because of the cravings at war within and the coveting of that which cannot be obtained, he says, "you fight and you war" (*machesthe kai polemeite*).[38] And some in their passion and jealous desire have gone so far as to "commit murder" (*phoneuete*).[39] Such dire circumstances call for complete and unreserved submission to God with the appropriate cleansing and purification for sinful desires and deeds as well as lamentation and mourning for personal and community healing (4.7-10). James is very clear here. To be a friend of God like Abraham, rather than friendly with the world, believers must resist the devil and submit to the One "who yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us" (4.4-6).[40]

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[38]See Danker (2009), 291, 223-224, for definitions of *polemos*, *polemeo*, *mache*, and *machomai* (used only here in the book of James). Danker indicates that James uses these words hyperbolically, but a literal meaning should not be dismissed. For other NT uses, see Moulton and Geden (1978), 619, 831.

[39]Danker (2009), 375, gives "take life" or "kill" as the basic meaning of *phoneuo* (used at 2.11; 4.2; 5.6), so "with legal authorization, execute . . . [but] without legal authorization, murder." Keener (2014), 679, comments, "Diatribe often included hyperbole, or graphic, rhetorical exaggeration for effect. Most of James's readers have presumably not literally killed anyone, but they are exposed to violent teachers (3.13-18) who regard murder as a satisfactory means of attaining justice and redistribution of wealth. James counsels prayer instead. Later he has much harsher words for the oppressors, however; they were guilty of exploiting their hungry workers and violently silencing those who spoke for justice (cf. 5.1-6)." Cf. also 5.5-6, *ethrepsate tas kardias humon en hemera sphages* (literally, "you nourished the hearts of you as in a day of slaughter"; see parallels in Acts 8.32; Romans 8.36) and *katedikasate, ephoneusate ton dikaion, ouk antitassetai humin* (literally, "you condemned, you killed the righteous man, he does not resist you"). Brown and Comfort (1990), 804.

[40]Even though not stated, the idea of being descendants of Abraham as inheritors of the covenant of promise is surely in the mind of James here.

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So in his message, James counters the sinful ideology of the hot-headed radicals who would resort to violence against so-called legal forms of oppression. He forthrightly condemns the well-to-do oppressors and their actions against the poor and the needy. And he gives encouragement and comfort to the spiritually minded, to those who would follow the way of the ancient wisdom, the way of the Lord, the way of humble submission to God and his care for all. Admittedly, his message, as it stands in written form, is difficult to organize, and any formal outline is arbitrary and superimposed on the text. But the outline suggested below attempts to organize the message of James along the socioeconomic theme argued in this paper. As stated earlier, James moves easily from one thought to the next, and he interlaces ideas and concepts with key words that are repeated during the progression of his message. This is what we should expect, if the book of James originated as a "homily" or verbal message that was written down subsequently for dissemination to Jewish-Christian communities of the Diaspora.

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OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF JAMES

1.1, Salutation

1.2-27, Perseverance during times of trial
- 1.2-8, Joy, wisdom, and persistent faith during trials
- 1.9-11, Poverty, riches, and "pride" during trials
- 1.12, Blessed reward of patient endurance through trials
- 1.13-18, Admonition not to blame God but recognize his goodness in trials
- 1.19-27, Encouragement to be obedient to the Word during trials
  - 1.19-21, Sincerity in hearing the Word and the avoidance of anger and evil deeds
  - 1.22-25, Folly of hearing but not doing and the blessedness of hearing and doing
  - 1.26-27, Pure religion (help to the poor) instead of worthless religion (verbal criticism)

2.1-26, Love to all equally and not just to the rich during times of trial
- 2.1-4, Favoritism in the assembly condemned
- 2.5-7, Actions of the rich condemned, faith of those who are poor lauded
- 2.8-13, Admonition to follow the royal law and to love others with no favoritism
- 2.14-26, Admonition to have a faith that works and to help those who are needy
  - 2.14-19, Need for charitable works proven by common sense
  - 2.20-26, Need for works proven by the righteous deeds of Abraham and Rahab

3.1–4.17, Control of the tongue and restraint of reckless actions during times of trial
- 3.1-12, The need for and the difficulty of control of the tongue
  - 3.1-2, Control of the tongue demanded especially of community leaders and teachers
  - 3.3-8, Control of the tongue difficult because of its fiery evil and deadly poison
  - 3.9-12, Control of the tongue necessary to be consistent in our praise of God, the Lord
- 3.13-18, The way of wisdom and knowledge and control of the tongue
  - 3.13-14, By deeds of humility versus bitter envy and selfish ambition
  - 3.15-16, Not by earthly, devilish wisdom that leads to discord and evil practices
  - 3.17-18, By heavenly, pure wisdom that leads to peace, mercy, and righteousness
- 4.1-17, The evils of the lack of control of the tongue highlighted and condemned
  - 4.1-4, Asking God with impure, sensual motives prohibited
  - 4.5-10, Submission to God with humility and penitent mourning demanded
  - 4.11-12, Slander and judgment of fellow believers, and the law, condemned
  - 4.13-17, The evil and sin of bragging and boasting about business and making money

5.1-20, Perseverance in suffering during times of trial
- 5.1-6, Knowledge that rich oppressors will be judged yields patience
- 5.7-12, Confidence in God's ultimate judgment yields patience
- 5.13-20, Vibrant community life of believers yields patience

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APPENDIX ONE

"Pro-Roman and Anti-Roman Sentiments"[41]

"The attitude of the subject peoples toward their Roman rulers under the Republic is described in Volume I. The masses hated their foreign conquerors and exploiters, the propertied minority in general acquiesced in and supported the foreign regime of 'law and order' which protected their vested economic and political interests. This situation continued without essential change under the rule of the emperors, except for the increase in the size of the privileged classes throughout the Empire. The literature of the first two centuries, the imposing array of public works and philanthropies whose proud inscribed testimonials have come down to us–these, products of the upper strata of Roman and provincial society, echo faithfully the official imperial propaganda celebrating the enlightened, beneficent government of the Principate. The major theme is that liberty has been exchanged for peace, protection, and prosperity; a secondary theme is that in any case revolt against the world-wide dominion and unprecedented might of Rome is futile. But underneath the surface calm of the *Pax Romana*, the hatred of the Roman regime and its visible symbols–the inexorable tax collector and the wealthy landholder or merchant, the arrogant government official and the bullying soldiery–smouldered among the masses and erupted in recurrent local riots and occasionally in sizable revolts."

[41]Section introduction in Lewis and Reinhold (1966), Sourcebook II, 410.

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APPENDIX TWO

Synopsis of the Book of James in Light of Its Socioeconomic Context[42]

1.2-8. Joy, wisdom, and persistent faith during trials. "In this opening section James introduces the major themes of his letter, by which he responds to the trials of poverty and oppression faced by many people in his day, including peasants in Judea and Galilee. . . . The specific trials he addresses in this letter are the poverty and oppression experienced by the poor (1.9-11; 5.1-6; cf. 2.5-6)."

1.9-11. Poverty, riches, and "pride" during trials. "Wealthy landowners regularly exploited the poor throughout the empire, and Palestine was no exception; such economic tensions eventually provoked a war against Rome, in the course of which less well-to-do Jewish patriots slaughtered Jewish aristocrats. The Old Testament and Jewish wisdom literature stress that riches fade, that God vindicates the oppressed and the poor in the end, and that he judges those who keep their wealth and do not share with the poor."

1.12. Blessed reward of patient endurance through trials. "Distresses were viewed as temptations, providing opportunities to sin. The term translated 'trials' (NASB; cf. NIV) or 'testing' did not necessarily mean 'temptation' (KJV, NRSV) in the modern sense, however; the tester could be interested in the distressed person's perseverance, rather than his or her defeat. . . . Famines, poverty, and oppression were among events viewed as testings."

1.13-18. Admonition not to blame God but recognize his goodness in trials. "Jewish texts distinguish between God's motives in testing people (in love, seeking their good) and Satan's

[42]Underlined headings are from the outline of the book of James (see above). The quotations are excerpts taken from Craig Keener's comments on James in *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (2014), 672-683. Better than most commentators, Dr. Keener highlights the socioeconomic setting of the message of James.

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motives in testing them (to make them fall). . . . Although James does not deny Satan's indirect role (4.7), he emphasizes here the human element in succumbing to temptation. . . . People choose to sin, and they dare not say that God is responsible for their response to testing (by contrast, Greek literature was full of people protesting that their temptation was too great to resist). . . . Rather than sending testing to break people (1.12-16), God sends good gifts, including creation or rebirth (verse 18). That God is author of everything good was a common belief in antiquity. . . . Whether he refers to believers' rebirth through the gospel or to humanity's initial creation by God's word is disputed. . . . The point is clear either way: God's giving birth is contrasted with desire's giving birth (1.15), and it illustrates God's grace toward people (1.17)."

<u>1.19-27. Encouragement to be obedient to the Word during trials</u>. "James now turns to appropriate ways to deal with testing. The revolutionaries' model, which was gaining popularity in Jewish Palestine and would ultimately lead to Jerusalem's destruction, was not the appropriate response. James condemns not only violent acts but also the violent rhetoric that incites them."

<u>1.19-21. Sincerity in hearing the Word and the avoidance of anger and evil deeds</u>. "These are by far some of the most common admonitions in Jewish wisdom, from Proverbs on (e.g., 14.29; 15.18; 16.32; 19.11); Greek parallels are no less easy to adduce. James contrasts this biblical and traditional wisdom with the spirit of revolution sweeping his land. . . . The militant Jewish resistance emphasized striking out at the Romans and their aristocratic vassals, supposing that they would be acting as agents of God's righteous indignation. But James associates righteousness with peace (3.8) and nonresistance (5.7). . . . 'Wickedness' (NASB) in this context must refer to unrighteous anger (1.20); 'meekness' (KJV) is the virtue of the nonresistant."

<u>1.22-25. Folly of hearing but not doing and the blessedness of hearing and doing</u>.

<u>1.26-27. Pure religion (help to the poor) instead of worthless criticism (verbal criticism)</u>. "James

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again (cf. 1.19) condemns uncontrolled speech, which would include recent impassioned denunciations of Roman rule likely to lead to violence. . . . In contrast to the violent and unruly religion of the Jewish revolutionaries, true religion involves defending the socially powerless (Exodus 22.20-24; Psalms 146.9; Isaiah 1.17) and avoiding worldliness (i.e., the values and behavior of the world). Orphans and widows had neither direct means of support nor automatic legal defenders in that society."

2.1-26. Love to all equally and not just to the rich during times of trial.

2.1-4. Favoritism in the assembly condemned. "In Judea, as in most of the empire, the rich were oppressing the poor (2.6-7). But the temptation to make rich converts or inquirers feel welcome at the expense of the poor was immoral (2.4). The language of impartiality was normally applied especially to legal settings, but because synagogues served both as houses of prayer and as community courts, this predominantly legal image naturally applies to any gatherings there. . . . Moralists and satirists mocked the special respect given to the wealthy, which often amounted to a self-demeaning way to seek funds or other help. . . . In the eastern Mediterranean gold rings also marked great wealth and status. Clothing likewise distinguished the wealthy, who could be ostentatious, from others; many peasants had only one cloak, which would thus often be dirty. . . . Jewish legal texts condemn judges who make one litigant stand while another is permitted to sit; these hearings often took place in synagogues, which doubled as community centers. To avoid partiality on the basis of clothing, some second-century rabbis required both litigants to dress in the same kind of clothes. . . . Roman laws explicitly favored the rich. Persons of lower class, who were thought to act from economic self-interest, could not bring accusations against persons of higher class, and the laws prescribed harsher penalties for lower-class persons convicted of offenses than for offenders from the higher class. Biblical law, most Jewish law,

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and traditional Greek philosophers had always rejected such distinctions as immoral. In normal times, the urban public respected the rich as public benefactors, although many of the revolutionaries recognized in the Jerusalem aristocracy pro-Roman enemies. The Old Testament forbade partiality on the basis of economic status (Leviticus 19.15) and called judges among God's people to judge impartially, as God did."

2.5-7. Actions of the rich condemned, faith of those who are poor lauded. "Roman courts always favored the rich, who could initiate lawsuits against social inferiors, although social inferiors could not hope to win lawsuits against them. In theory, Jewish courts sought to avoid this discrimination, but as in most cultures people of means naturally had legal advantages. They were usually able to argue their cases more articulately or to hire others to do so for them. . . . Some of the Galilean aristocracy (such as those settled in Tiberias) were considered impious by general Jewish standards. But this accusation may apply specifically to anti-Christian opposition. Much of the opposition Christians faced in Jerusalem came especially from the Sadducean aristocracy (Acts 4.1; 23.6-10)."

2.8-13. Admonition to follow the royal law and to love others with no favoritism. "A 'royal' law, i.e., an imperial edict, was higher than the justice of the aristocracy, and because Judaism universally acknowledged God to be the supreme King, his law could be described in these terms. . . . Christians could naturally apply it especially to Jesus' teaching; like some other Jewish teachers, Jesus used this passage in Leviticus 19.18 to epitomize the law (cf. Mark 12.29-34). . . . Jewish teachers distinguished 'heavier' from 'lighter' sins, but felt that God required obedience to even the 'smallest' commandments, rewarding the obedient with eternal life and punishing transgressors with damnation. . . . Traditional Stoics (against the Epicureans) went even farther in declaring that all sins were equal, a Stoic view widely known even among non-Stoics. . . . The

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point here is that rejecting the law of economic impartiality in Leviticus 19.15, or the general principle of love behind it (Leviticus 19.18), was rejecting the whole authority of God (James 2.8). . . . Jewish tradition sometimes compared oppression of the poor with murder (cf. also 5.6). But James might here allude to religiously conservative revolutionaries, too religious to commit adultery, who would nevertheless not scruple at shedding the blood of Jewish aristocrats. At the time this letter was written, these 'assassins' were regularly stabbing aristocrats to death in the temple. . . . James's point here is that if his readers are not impartial judges, they will answer to the God who is an impartial judge; his impartiality in judgment is rehearsed throughout the Old Testament and Jewish tradition. Jewish teachers defined God's character especially by two attributes, mercy and justice, and suggested that mercy normally won out over justice. They would have agreed with James that the merciless forfeited a right to mercy, and they had their own sayings similar to this one."

<u>2.14-26. Admonition to have a faith that works and to help those who are needy</u>.

<u>2.14-19. Need for charitable works proven by common sense</u>. "James could be reacting partly against a misinterpretation of Paul's teaching, as some commentators have suggested, but even more he might react especially against a strain of Jewish piety that was fueling the revolutionary fervor that was leading toward war (cf. 1.26-27; 2.19). James uses words like 'faith' differently from the way Paul does, but neither writer would be opposed to the other's meaning. Genuine faith is a reality on which one stakes one's life, not merely passive assent to a doctrine. For James, expressions of faith like nondiscrimination (2.8-9) and nonviolence (2.10-12) must be lived, not merely acknowledged. . . . God commanded his people to supply the needs of the poor (Deuteronomy 15.7-8). To fail to do so was disobedience to his law. 'Go in peace' was a Jewish farewell blessing, but Jewish people were expected to show hospitality to other Jewish people in

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need. 'Be warmed' (NASB) alludes to how cold the homeless could become (especially relevant in a place of high elevation like Jerusalem in winter). . . . Jewish people held Abraham to be the ultimate example of such hospitality (cf. 2.21-23)."

<u>2.20-26. Need for works proven by the righteous deeds of Abraham and Rahab</u>. "James connects Genesis 15.6 with the offering of Isaac (Genesis 22), as in Jewish tradition. This event was the climax of Abraham's faith in God. . . . Abraham was 'declared righteous' at the *Aqedah*, the offering of Isaac, in the sense that God again acknowledged (Genesis 22.12) Abraham's prior faith, which had been tested ultimately at this point. The Old Testament called Abraham God's friend (2 Chronicles 20.7; Isaiah 41.8), and later Jewish writers delighted in this title for him. . . . Like the example of Abraham, the example of Rahab would not be controversial among James's Jewish readers. Like Abraham, Rahab was known for hospitality, but her act of saving the spies saved her as well (Joshua 2.1-21; 6.22-25)."

<u>3.1–4.17. Control of the tongue and restraint of reckless actions during times of trial</u>.

<u>3.1-12. The need for and the difficulty of control of the tongue</u>.

<u>3.1-2. Control of the tongue demanded especially of community leaders and teachers</u>. "Jewish sages also warned against teaching error and recognized that teachers would be judged strictly for leading others astray. Some who wanted to be teachers of wisdom were teaching the sort of 'wisdom' espoused by the Jewish revolutionaries, which led to violence (3.13-18). . . . That everyone sinned was standard Jewish doctrine; that one of the most common instruments of sin and harm was the human mouth was also a Jewish commonplace (as early as Proverbs, e.g., Proverbs 11.9; 12.18; 18.21)."

<u>3.3-8. Control of the tongue difficult because of its fiery evil and deadly poison</u>. "Controlling horses with bits and ships with rudders were common illustrations in the ancient Mediterranean.

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. . . James's point here . . . is simply the power of a small instrument. . . . Others also compared the spread of rumors to the igniting of what would rapidly become a forest fire. Here the image is that of a tongue that incites the whole body to violence. The boastful tongue plotting harm (Psalms 52.1-4) and the tongue as a hurtful fire (Psalms 39.1-3; 120.2-4; Proverbs 16.27; 26.21) are old images. That the fire is sparked by 'hell' suggests where it leads; Jewish pictures of Gehenna, like Jesus' images for the fate of the damned, typically included flame. . . . The tongue was like the deadliest snake, full of toxic venom (Psalms 140.3; cf. 58.1-6)."

<u>3.9-12. Control of the tongue necessary to be consistent in our praise of God, the Lord</u>. "Some other Jewish teachers also noted the incongruity of blessing God while cursing other people, who were made in his image; even more often, they recognized that whatever one did to other humans, it was as if one did it to God himself, because people were made in his image. James's readers could not easily miss his point. This text makes clear the sort of perverse speech that 3.1-12 addresses: antagonistic speech, which fits the situation the letter as a whole addresses. Whether by incendiary rhetoric or in other ways, cursing mortal enemies was incompatible with worshiping God, no matter how embedded it had become in Jewish patriotic tradition (since the Maccabean era). . . . James produces two other common examples of impossible incongruity. Figs, olives, and grapes were the three most common agricultural products of the Judean hills, and alongside wheat and barley they would have constituted the most common crops of the Mediterranean region as a whole."

<u>3.13-18. The way of wisdom and knowledge and control of the tongue</u>.

<u>3.13-14. By deeds of humility versus bitter envy and selfish ambition</u>. "The paradigm of violent retaliation, urged by Zealots and other Jewish revolutionaries, claimed to be religious and wise; James urges the poor to respond by waiting on God instead (5.7-11). That James was wiser than

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advocates of revolution was proved in the aftermath of the Judean revolt of A.D. 66-70, when Judea was devastated, Jerusalem destroyed, and Jerusalem's survivors enslaved. . . . Those who wished to teach others as wise sages (3.1) needed to show their wisdom by gentleness; this is the antithesis of the advocates of revolution, who were gaining popularity in the tensions stirred by poverty and oppression in the land. . . . The term translated 'jealousy' (NASB) or 'envy' (NIV, NRSV) here is the term for 'zeal' also appropriated by the Zealots, who fancied themselves successors of Phinehas (Numbers 25.11; Psalms 106.30-31) and the Maccabees and sought to liberate Jewish Palestine from Rome by force of arms. 'Strife' (KJV; 'selfish ambition'–NASB, NIV, NRSV) also was related to disharmony and had been known to provoke wars."

<u>3.15-16. Not by earthly, devilish wisdom that leads to discord and evil practices</u>. "As opposed to heavenly wisdom, the wisdom of violence (3.14) was thoroughly earthly, human, and demonic (cf. similarly Matthew 16.22-23)."

<u>3.17-28. By heavenly, pure wisdom that leads to peace, mercy, and righteousness</u>. "Wisdom 'from above,' i.e., from God (1.17; 3.15) is 'pure,' not mixed with anything else (in this case, not mixed with demonic wisdom–3.14-16); it is thus 'unhypocritical.' . . . God's genuine wisdom is nonviolent rather than giving to lashing out: 'peaceable,' 'gentle,' 'open to reason,' 'full of mercy' (cf. 2.13); it was also 'unwavering' (NASB), better rendered 'impartial' (NIV), or 'without prejudice or favoritism' (cf. 2.1-9). In Judea, such wisdom is neither that of those like the Zealots nor of those supporting the aristocracy. . . . The image of virtues as seeds and fruits has many parallels (e.g., Proverbs 11.18; Isaiah 32.17), but James's point in the context is this: true wisdom is the wisdom of peace, not of violence. Although many Pharisaic teachers extolled peace, many populists were advocating violence, and James's message was in many regards countercultural."

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4.1-17. The evils of the lack of control of the tongue highlighted and condemned. "God's wisdom was not the populist wisdom of the revolutionaries (3.13-18); thus those whose faith was genuine (2.14-26) could not waver between the two options. James addresses here many of the poor, the oppressed, who are tempted to try to overthrow their oppressors and seize their goods."

4.1-4. Asking God with impure, sensual motives prohibited. "Most Greco-Roman philosophers and many Diaspora Jews repeatedly condemned people who were ruled by their passions, and described their desires for pleasure as 'waging war.' . . . Most of James's readers have presumably not literally killed anyone, but they are exposed to violent teachers (3.13-18) who regard murder as a satisfactory means of attaining justice and redistribution of wealth. James counsels prayer instead. Later he has much harsher words for the oppressors, however; they were guilty of exploiting their hungry workers and violently silencing those who spoke for justice (cf. 5.1-6). . . . Jewish prayers typically asked God to supply genuine needs. . . . James believes that such prayers will be answered (cf. Proverbs 10.24), even though the oppressed will always be worse off than they should be (cf. Proverbs 13.23). But requests based on envy of others' wealth or status were meant to satisfy only their passions. . . . In the Old Testament, Israel was often called an adulteress for claiming to serve God while pursuing idols (e.g., Hosea 1–3). Those who claimed to be God's friends (James 2.23) but were really moral clients of the world (friendship often applied to patron-client relationships)–that is, they shared the world's values (3.13-18)–were really unfaithful to God."

4.5-10. Submission to God with humility and penitent mourning demanded. "Here James . . . may be citing a proverbial maxim based on such texts as Exodus 20.5, Deuteronomy 32.21, and Joel 2.18, summarizing the sense of Scripture thus: 'God is jealous over the spirit he gave us' and will tolerate no competition for its affection (4.4). . . . James cites Proverbs 3.34 almost exactly

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as it appeared in the common form of the Septuagint. This idea became common in Jewish wisdom texts. Humility included appropriate submission, in this case to God's sovereign plan for a person's life (4.7, 10). . . . One must choose between the values of God and those of the world (4.4), between God's wisdom and that which is demonic (3.15, 17). The point is that a person who lives by God's values (in this case, his way of peace) is no part of Satan's kingdom (in contrast to the religious-sounding revolutionaries). . . . Old Testament texts exhorted priests and people in general to 'draw near to God.' Purification was also necessary for priests (Exodus 30.19), but the image here is not specifically priestly; those responsible for bloodshed, even if only as representatives of a corporately guilty group, were to wash their hands (Deuteronomy 21.6; cf. James 4.2). 'Purification' often came to be used in an inward, moral sense (e.g., Jeremiah 4.14). . . . 'Double-minded' again alludes to the general ancient contempt for hypocrisy; one must act from either God's peaceful wisdom or the devil's hateful wisdom (3.13-18; 4.4). . . . Old Testament texts often connected mourning and self-humiliation with repentance (Leviticus 23.29; 26.41), especially when confronted by divine judgment (2 Kings 22.11; Joel 1.13-14; 2.12-13). The exaltation of the humble was also a teaching of the prophets."

<u>4.11-12. Slander and judgment of fellow believers, and the law, condemned</u>. "James returns to the specific worldly behavior his readers are following: harsh and even violent speech (3.1-12). (He either addresses social stratification within the Christian community or, more likely, uses 'brothers' in its more common Jewish sense of 'fellow Jews.' Jewish revolutionaries had already begun killing aristocrats, and inflammatory rhetoric was certainly even more common.) His general principle was standard Old Testament and Jewish wisdom opposing slander, which many of his readers may not have been considering in this context. The law declared God's love for Israel and commanded his people to love one another (2.8); to slander a fellow Jew was thus to

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disrespect the law. . . . That God alone was the true judge was a common Jewish and New Testament teaching. In Jewish teaching, earthly courts proceeded only on his authority, and those who ruled in them had to judge by the law. Investigations had to be conducted thoroughly, with a minimum of two witnesses; acting as a false witness, slandering someone to a court without genuine firsthand information, was punishable according to the judgment the falsely accused person would have received if convicted."

4.13-17. The evil and sin of bragging and boasting about business and making money. "Having counseled the oppressed, James quickly turns to the oppressors, denouncing their self-satisfied forgetfulness of God. Most of the wealth in the Roman Empire was accumulated by one of two means: the landed gentry, of high social class, made their wealth from land-based revenues such as crops raised by tenant farmers or slaves; the merchant class gathered great wealth without the corresponding social status. James addresses both merchants (4.13-17) and the landed aristocracy (5.1-6). . . . Many philosophers (especially Stoics) and Jewish sages liked to warn their hearers that they had no control over the future. . . . The primary markets for manufactured goods were towns and cities; projecting commitments and profits was also a normal business practice. Traders were not always wealthy, but here they are at least seeking wealth. The sin here is arrogant presumption–feeling secure enough to leave God out of one's calculations (4.16; cf. Jeremiah 12.1; Amos 6.1)."

5.1-20. Perseverance in suffering during times of trial.

5.1-6. Knowledge that rich oppressors will be judged yields patience. "Throughout most of the rural areas of the Roman Empire, including much of rural Galilee, rich landowners profited from the toil of tenant farmers (often alongside slaves) who worked their massive estates. That feudalism, with its serfs working rich landowners' property, arose only in medieval times is a

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misconception. This arrangement is simply less prominent in literature of Roman times because Roman literature concentrated on the cities, although only about ten percent of the empire is estimated to have been urban. . . . Most of James's denunciation takes the form of an Old Testament prophetic judgment oracle, paralleled also in some Jewish wisdom and apocalyptic texts. The difference between his denunciation of the rich and the violent speech he himself condemns (1.19, 26; 3.1-12; 4.11) is that he (like some Jewish visionaries of his era) appeals to God's judgment rather than to human retribution (4.12; cf. Deuteronomy 32.35; Proverbs 20.22). His prophecy was timely; a few years later the Jewish aristocracy was virtually obliterated in the revolt against Rome. . . . Clothing was one of the primary signs of wealth in antiquity; many peasants had only one garment. . . . Some other ancient writers ridiculed the rust of unused, hoarded wealth. For 'rust' and 'moth' (verse 2) together, compare perhaps Matthew 6.19. As Jewish sources often noted, wealth would be worthless in the impending day of God's judgment. . . . The law of Moses forbade withholding wages, even overnight; if the injured worker cried out to God, God would avenge him (Deuteronomy 24.14-15; cf. Leviticus 19.13; Proverbs 11.24; Jeremiah 22.13; Malachi 3.5). That the wrong done the oppressed would itself cry out to God against the oppressor was also an Old Testament image (Genesis 4.10). In first-century Palestine, many day laborers depended on their daily wages to purchase food for themselves and their families; withholding money could mean that they and their families would go hungry. . . . The income absentee landlords received from agriculture was such that the wages they paid workers could not even begin to reflect the profits they accumulated. Although the rich supported public building projects (in return for attached inscriptions honoring them), they were far less inclined to pay sufficient wages to their workers. At least as early as the second century, Jewish teachers suggested that even failing to leave gleanings for the poor was robbing them (based on Leviticus

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19.9-10; 23.22; Deuteronomy 24.19). . . . Most crops were harvested in or near summer, and extra laborers were often hired for the harvest. Many Diaspora Jewish texts called God 'Sabaoth' or 'Lord of Saboath,' transliterating the Hebrew word for 'hosts': the God with vast armies. If it was a bad idea to offend a powerful official, it was thus a much worse idea to secure the enmity of God. . . . The rich and their guests consumed much meat in a day of slaughter, i.e., a feast (often at sheep-shearing or harvest; cf. 1 Samuel 25.4, 36); once an animal was slaughtered, as much as possible was eaten at once, because the rest could be preserved only by drying and salting. Meat was generally unavailable to the poor except during public festivals. . . . The picture here is of the rich being fattened like cattle for the day of their own slaughter (cf. Jeremiah 12.3; Amos 4.1-3). As often in the Old Testament (e.g., Amos 6.4-7), the sin in verse 5 is not exploitation per se (as in verse 4) but a lavish lifestyle while others go hungry or in need. . . . Jewish tradition recognized that the wicked plotted against the righteous, as the sufferings of many Old Testament heroes (such as David and Jeremiah) showed. Judicial oppression of the poor, repeatedly condemned in the Old Testament, was viewed as murder in later Jewish texts; to take a person's garment or to withhold a person's wages was to risk that person's life. James 'the Just' himself was later martyred by the high priest for his denunciations of the behavior of the rich."

<u>5.7-12. Confidence in God's ultimate judgment yields patience</u>. "The oppressors would be punished (5.1-6), but the oppressed have to wait on God (cf. 1.4) rather than take matters violently into their own hands. This exhortation did not mean that they could not speak out against injustice (5.1-6); it only forbade violence and personally hostile speech (5.9) as an appropriate solution to injustice. . . . Harvest here (cf. verse 4) becomes an image of the day of judgment, as elsewhere in Jewish literature. . . . Hellenistic Jewish tradition celebrated Job's

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endurance. . . . Oaths were verbal confirmations guaranteed by appeal to a divine witness; violation of an oath in God's name broke the third commandment (Exodus 20.7; Deuteronomy 5.11). Like some groups of Greek philosophers, some kinds of Essenes would not swear any further oaths after they had completed their initiatory oaths; the Pharisees, however, allowed oaths. . . . Oaths generally called on the gods to witness the veracity of one's intention and had to be kept, or invited a curse on the one who had spoken the untruth. Vows were a more specific category of oaths to undertake some duty or abstain from something for a particular period of time. . . . The difficulty is ascertaining what sort of swearing is in view in the context. Some scholars have suggested a warning against taking a Zealot-type oath (cf. Acts 23.12); while this could fit the context of James very well, his readers may not have recognized something so specific. The idea may be that one should not impatiently (5.7-11) swear; rather one should pray (5.13)."

5.13-20. Vibrant community life of believers yields patience. "Nonresistance did not mean pretending that things did not matter (as the Stoics did) or simply waiting unconsoled until the end of time (as some Jewish apocalyptic writers may have done); it meant prayer. . . . Wounds were healed with oil, and those with headaches and those wishing to avoid some diseases were anointed with olive oil for 'medicinal' purposes. . . . Oil was also used to anoint priests or rulers, pouring oil over the head as a consecration to God. Christians may have combined a symbolic medicinal use with a symbol of handing one over to the power of God's Spirit (Mark 6.13). . . . A general prayer for healing was one of the blessings regularly recited in synagogues. . . . Visiting the sick was an act of piety in early Judaism that Christians probably continued (cf. Matthew 25.36, 43, for ailing missionaries). . . . The Old Testament prophets often used healing from sickness as an image for healing from sin, and Jewish literature often associated sin and sickness.

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. . . James does not imply a direct causal relationship between all sickness and sin. . . . Jewish wisdom also recognized that God would hear the sick and connected this hearing with renouncing sin. But although only a very few pious Jewish teachers were normally thought able to produce such assured results in practice (cf. James 5.17-18), James applies this possibility of praying with faith to all believers. . . . Although all Palestinian Jews prayed for rain, few miracle workers were thought able to secure such answers to prayer. . . . The miracle of securing rain eventually came to be viewed as equivalent to raising the dead. The piety of these miraculous rainmakers always set them apart from others in Jewish tradition, but here James affirms that Elijah, the greatest model for such miracle workers, was a person like James's hearers and is a model for all believers (1 Kings 17.1; 18.41-46; cf. 1 Samuel 12.17-18; for Elijah's weakness cf. 1 Kings 19.4). . . . In Jewish belief, the former righteousness of one who turned away was no longer counted in his or her favor (Ezekiel 18.24-25), but (in most Jewish formulations) the repentance of the wicked canceled out his or her former wickedness (Ezekiel 18.21-23), if conjoined with proper atonement. Some Jews regarded some forms of apostasy as unforgivable, but James welcomes the sinner back. In this context, he might among other things invite revolutionaries to return to the fold."

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Davids has a good section on "Historical Background" (10-12). Of interest is his idea that the book of James presents "a theology of suffering" as a unifying theme (12ff.). He states, "Withing the context of a theology of suffering, James' primary concern is with the health of the community. The concern of the work is not simply suffering, but suffering within the context of communal concern. This means that it is wrong to read the epistle with an individualistic focus; that would be to miss the chief concern of the author. Rather, the author addresses the behavior of individuals because that behavior has an impact upon the life of the community" (13).

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In a section about modern life and the teaching of St. James (lxxii-lxxx), Knowling argues that the brother of the Lord promotes "a Christian socialism." He writes, "With St. James's knowledge of his countrymen and of the social life of the Jewish capital it is no wonder that he speaks in tones of indignation against the rich and their misuse of wealth, and the words which describe the estimation of poverty and riches current amongst the Hebrew people in the days of Jesus may be employed no less forcibly of the social environment of St. James" (lxxiii).

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Plummer accurately notes in his comments about the persons addressed (42ff.), "The social antagonism so often alluded to in the Epistle, when interpreted to mean an antagonism between Jew and Jew, corresponds to a state of society which is known to have existed in Palestine and the neighbouring countries during the half-century which preceded the Jewish war of A.D. 66-70 (cf. Matthew 11.5; 19.23, 24; Luke 1.53; 6.20, 24; 16.19, 20). During that period the wealthy Jews allied themselves with the Romans, in order more securely to oppress their poorer fellow-countrymen. And seeing that the Gospel in the first instance spread chiefly among the poor, this social antagonism between rich and poor Jews frequently became an antagonism between unbelieving and believing Jews" (49-50). Compare his comments on the rich and the poor (128-129), on the causes of strife (215ff.), and on the iniquities of the rich (274ff.).

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Stevens begins his summation of the message of James with a good emphasis on its socioeconomic setting (i.e., condemnation of the oppression of the poor by the rich and the exhortation for those oppressed to be patient and wait on God's judgment, 276-278). He highlights the vibrant reflection of Jewish wisdom in the book and says, "It contains an extremely practical message, adapted to the trying circumstances of its readers. It is simple and straightforward and without any formal logical structure. The two peculiarities of the epistle which strike one most forcibly are the Old Testament form of its thoughts, and the resemblance of many of the ideas to those of Jesus. It reads like a Jewish sapiential book, but the wisdom which is commended is the wisdom of Jesus" (279). Then he concludes with a more traditional overview of the doctrinal contents of James (279ff.).

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See Witherington's comments on the social ethos of James's audience (401-405) and the social setting of James (526-527). His work is thorough with lots of insights and an extensive bibliography (409-415), but one loses focus on the overall theme of James with so much detail.