

James's Theological Grammar

BY ROBERT W. WALL

A theological grammar of James, guided by analogy to the Church's apostolic Rule of Faith, can help us uncover the letter's rich Trinitarian theology. It enables a faithful community to mine this sacred text for wisdom that saves and Christian maturity that performs "every good work."

A literary grammar provides a body of rules that orders the flowchart of a composition and governs how its various parts are related together to convey meaning to its readers. The grammar of a biblical composition, such as the letter of James, consists of a body of interpenetrating theological agreements that help explain what is written and provides a *gubernaculum interpretationis*—"governor for interpretation"—to make certain a faithful community mines the sacred text in search of a wisdom that saves and a Christian maturity that performs "every good work" (cf. 2 Timothy 3:15-17).

While the theological grammar of any biblical composition is constructed from the raw materials the text itself provides, its detection is guided by analogy to the Church's apostolic Rule of Faith. For this reason the grammar statement of any biblical composition will be Trinitarian in substance, narrative in its flow, and formative in its effect. Scripture's simultaneity, which is otherwise impossible to detect amidst the sheer diversity of its witnesses, is only evinced when the interpretation of all its parts is carefully monitored by this Rule.[1]

In this article I attempt to construct a theological grammar of the letter of James.[2] It is organized by Tertullian's version of the apostolic Rule boldly set out as a body of five theological agreements in his *Prescription against Heretics*, §13. I follow his somewhat later version of the apostolic Rule for

two reasons. First, his narrative is fully Trinitarian, thereby placing it more firmly on a trajectory beyond Irenaeus's precedent that aims us toward the Nicene Creed, which is the definitive creedal analogy of apostolic faith. Second, Tertullian's articulation of apostolic religion seems prescient of the importance posited in the dialog between Scripture's Pauline and Catholic letter collections. In this sense, Tertullian's Rule helps facilitate a constructive dialog between these two disparate but complementary canonical collections.

THE CREATOR GOD

According to Tertullian, "there is only one God, and that he is none other than the creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through his own Word, first of all sent forth."[3]

In like manner, James claims that God is the one and only true God (2:19). God is Creator of all things who has made every person in God's own likeness (3:9; cf. 1:17-18). God is therefore personal, to whom the believer turns when lacking in wisdom needed to pass daily spiritual tests (1:5). God is heavenly Father (1:17, 27; 3:9), from whom the wise humbly receive (1:21) good and perfect gifts (1:17) which are generously provided by God, in every case (1:17) and without discrimination (1:5). Therefore, this generous God sends forth the "word of truth" to reveal the Creator's perfect plan of salvation in order to guide the redeemed humanity into the age to come (1:18), which is a restored creation, made complete, perfect and lacking in nothing (1:4).

In particular, God has chosen those out of this broken and corrupted world who are its last, least, lost, and lame to be enriched by their love for God (2:5): as Scripture teaches, "God gives grace to the humble" (4:6b). Thus, not only are the sick healed and the sinner forgiven by the Lord in the present age (5:14-16), their worship of God (5:13) will be vindicated at God's coming triumph when those who oppress them will be destroyed (5:5-6) and their own material fortunes will be reversed (1:9-11). Indeed, God promises future blessing, "the crown of life," to all those who love God (1:12).

To love God is to do God's will; for life is granted to those who do God's will (4:15). In that God is also our Judge (4:11-12; 5:9), with the authority to save and destroy (4:12), humanity is obliged to do God's will. A concrete record of God's will is transmitted by the gift of the biblical Torah which is the rule of faith for the faith community (2:8-13). God will save those who obey the law (1:25; 2:13) and will destroy those who live foolishly and disobey the law of God. As Scripture also teaches, "God opposes the proud" (4:6a). The apocalypse of God's triumph over enemies (the deceived, the slanderous teacher, the arrogant rich, the impatient complainer, the sinner and apostate) is imminent (5:7-8), at which moment creation will be purified and restored (1:4; cf. 5:17-18), the reign of God will be secured on earth (2:5), and blessing will be dispensed therein to all those who evince by their wise

responses to their spiritual tests a robust love for God (1:12; 2:5)—such as Abraham, who is called a "friend of God" (2:23).

CHRIST JESUS

According to Tertullian, "[Jesus is] the Word who is called God's Son, and, under the name of God, was seen 'in diverse manners' by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ; thenceforth he preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles; having been crucified, he rose again the third day; (then) having ascended into the heavens, he sat at the right hand of the Father."

The Christology of James is famously underdeveloped. Instead of more explicit formulations of Christ's coming into the world, James rather says that God sends forth "the word of truth" into the world (1:17-18) to fulfill the promise of blessing (1:12) and to save God's people (1:21) from the result of their deception and sin (1:13-16), which is death (5:19-20). This "word" from God reveals the plan and purposes of God's promised salvation (1:18) and as such is a "good and perfect gift" (1:17). The word comes down from heaven as a revelation of divine wisdom (1:5; 3:17) and is especially apropos for believers during a season of spiritual testing (1:2-3). As with every article of divine revelation, this word of divine wisdom is trustworthy (1:18) and effective (1:21) in passing the spiritual test because it accords with God's promise and plan of salvation (1:18; cf. 1:12). As such, the way of wisdom is a 'word on target' which points humanity toward the complete restoration of human existence so that it lacks nothing (1:4). Toward this end, then, the word is the instrument by which God creates an eschatological community which will be recipient of God's promised blessing in the age to come (1:18; cf. 1:12; 2:5).

This heavenly word is "implanted" within the faith community (1:21) by the word of its faithful teachers (3:1), who are "wise and understanding" (3:13). Only within this community of the wise is the divine word "received" by believers who are both receptive to it (1:21; 5:12) and "pure" (i.e., spiritually mature; 1:21; cf. 1:27). They promptly do what the word requires (1:22-24) and are saved as a result (1:21), ultimately receiving the blessing promised to those who love God (1:25; 1:12; 3:18).

The subject matter of the word is summarized in 1:19 as "quick to hear" (i.e., obey the biblical Torah; cf. 1:22-2:26); "slow to speak" (i.e., use 'purifying' language toward and about others; cf. 3:1-18); and "slow to anger" (i.e., resist one's innate passion for pleasure; cf. 4:1-5:6). To refuse this wisdom because of duplicity (1:6-8; 3:9-12) or deception (1:16; 1:22), and then to substitute a false wisdom (3:15), will only result in spiritual failure, social chaos (3:16), personal evil (1:13-15), and ultimately death (5:19; 1:15). On the other hand, to apply divine wisdom to our spiritual tests results in life (1:12; 3:18;

4:15; 5:20). Of this the community's sacred tradition supplies many notable exemplars such as Jesus (2:1), Abraham (2:21-24), Rahab (2:25), Noah (4:4-5),[4] Job (5:9-11), and Elijah (5:16b-18).

In particular, Jesus received divine approval as the "glorious Lord Jesus Christ" (2:1) because of his obedience to the "royal law" (2:8): Jesus loved his poor neighbors, who are the chosen of God (2:5), and resisted their discrimination by the rich (2:1-4). Thus, he "did well" (cf. 2:8). Indeed, as is also true for Abraham (2:21-24) and Rahab (2:25), Jesus' obedience to God's will is exemplary of an observed wisdom that is quick to act upon the wisdom of "the perfect law of liberty" (1:22-25; 2:12), and especially its "royal (= kingly) law" (2:8)—the rule of God's coming kingdom (2:5). In this light, the realization of God's promised blessing (1:25) in the coming kingdom extends to all those who hold to the faith of "our glorious Lord Jesus Christ" (2:1) by caring for the marginal poor and resisting worldly evils (1:27).

But this narrative of God's redemptive agent differs from the Pauline witness and is largely responsible for the disquiet that James evokes among its Protestant interpreters. According to Paul's story-line, God sends forth a Christological rather than a sapiential word, which discloses and inaugurates the promised "righteousness of God." Under the weight of Paul's Christological monotheism and his Gentile mission, this Christological word is kerygmatic in subject matter—a proclaimed "word of faith" (Romans 10:6-8) that draws near to people in order to evoke their profession of faith that "Jesus is Lord" for their salvation (Romans 10:9). The test of faith for Paul, then, is not an observed wisdom (cf. Romans 8:5) but rather an obedient faith in the trustworthiness of his proclaimed gospel (Romans 1:5; 16:26).

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Further, Paul taught that the "faith of Jesus" (Romans 3:22; Galatians 2:20; 3:22), which is revealed on the Cross, resulted in his exaltation as glorious Lord (Philippians 2:5-11; cf. Acts 2:36) and blessing for those whom he loved (Galatians 2:20). However, Paul's Christological monotheism is concentrated on Jesus' messianic death and not his ministry among the poor: salvation is the pluriformed result of Jesus' death. This conception of the messianic mission put Paul at odds with his Jewish tradition, requiring him to re-think Scripture's story about God's salvation: for him, Christ is divine wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:30) and the "end of the law" (Romans 10:4).

COMMUNITY OF THE SPIRIT

Tertullian's conception of church is more local and congregational; his confession that "Christ sent instead of himself the Power of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe" has particular communities of believers in mind. James does as well. According to the letter, a community is created anew by the "word of truth" (as described above) that comes from God to save the world (1:18). According to God's will, the community is constituted by the "poor in the world" who are chosen to be "rich in faith" (2:5); and those pious poor who persist in their love for God will ultimately be blessed (1:12) and vindicated (5:4-6) at the coming triumph of God's reign (2:5; 5:7-11).

Members of this congregation are displaced within the world order (1:1) and face many trials as a result (1:2). A life of constant hardship and heartbreak, perhaps the result of their poverty and displacement, tests their love for God (1:3). Indeed, some of the members have failed their test and have 'wandered from the truth' in sin and error; and the prospect of their eternal life is imperiled (5:19-20).

The trials that threaten the community's relationship with God come from a variety of places (1:2). The principal location is within each person, where a spiritual struggle rages. The evil spirit of envy (4:5), fashioned by the Creator but directed by the Evil One (4:7), inclines even the believer toward "friendship with the world" and hostility toward the purposes of God (4:4). Interpersonal strife, leading even to murder, results from an inward passion for pleasure (4:1-2), which corrupts the petitioner's address to God (4:3) and understanding of God's will (4:13-17). As such, the believer's desires for an easy life or vile thoughts of a rival give birth to sin and so death (1:14-15; 3:14-16) rather than to wisdom and life (3:17-18).

Without spiritual maturity, the community also falls prey to "deception" about the nature of a true and approved religion (1:16, 22, 26; cf. 1:27), rooted in a faulty understanding of God and of God's requirements for God's people. Thus, for example, a congregation may come to believe that God approves of religious orthodoxy (2:19; cf. 2:8) that is merely confessed but never embodied (1:26; 2:14-17). But the requirements of God's covenant partner are more morally demanding and active than this (2:21-26).

Clearly, the congregation is the object of hostile forces outside of itself. Not only are there rich and powerful outsiders who undermine the community's faith (2:6-7) in order to exploit poor members for their own advantage (2:2-4; 5:1-6), the congregation is surrounded by a "world" which is God's enemy (4:4). Living within an anti-God society leads naturally to the accommodation of its impurity which threatens to contaminate the congregation's life together (1:27), specifically its caring treatment of the poor, whom friends of the "world" neglect and exploit (2:2-4, 6-7; 5:3-6); its language about one another (3:6); and the resigned contentment with one's lot in life (4:4-6, 14-15), which is necessary to resist a concern for Mammon and serve the interests of God (4:7-10).

Whether besieged by the forces of evil found within the individual believer or outside the believing community, the exhortation is the same: know God's spiritual/inward and social/external requirements and be wise in response to spiritual testing. Christian formation is directed by the "wise and understanding" teachers (3:13; see "elders" in 5:14), by whom the revelatory word is "implanted" and from whom it is humbly "received" (1:21). They are summoned by the sick to administer healing "prayer in faith" (5:15) in expectation of God's imminent healing of all creation (1:4) in accordance with the Creator's ultimate purposes (1:18).

Let me only add the following footnote to the preceding portrait of the community, which according to James is covenanted with God for eternal life. The sources for the idea of wisdom in James remain contested between scholars. However, they clearly include the *topoi* and rhetorical patterns of Hellenistic moral culture.[5] In keeping with this intellectual tradition, the wisdom that guides the faith community through its spiritual testing is applied to an internal moral world which calls the believer to accountability for wise or foolish actions. Yet, the overarching conception of this "way of wisdom" remains largely biblical. Thus, with Scripture, James pairs wisdom with Torah (1:22-25; 2:8-10): doing the law of God (essentially moral rather than cultic) is the wise thing to do because it not only results in purity but in God's blessing for the coming age. The test of faith, then, is an observed wisdom, exemplified by Jesus and Job, Abraham and Rahab. It is a way of wisdom that fairly summarizes the biblical proverbs to love the poor neighbor (2:1-8), to speak well of others (3:17), and to resist coveting worldly pleasures that the mature believer can ill afford (4:1-5).

Without spiritual maturity, a congregation may believe that God approves of religious orthodoxy that is merely confessed but never embodied. But, for James, the requirements of God's covenant partner are more morally demanding than this.

The character of this community for James is unrelated to its cultural or cultic identity as Jewish believers. Rather, the theological crisis is whether their poverty and powerlessness, and the spiritual test it naturally provokes, inclines them toward a more pious devotion to God (1:2-3). The status of their election (2:5) and their historic relationship to Abraham (2:21-24) is not primarily ethnic but is sociological and moral in emphasis: they are the marginal heirs of Abraham's promise (1:12; 2:5), who are friends of God (2:23) rather than of the world (4:4) because they perform merciful works like those of exemplary Abraham (2:23-24). In this sense, the sort of Christi-

anity that is approved by God is an ethical religion; its witness to God is measured by the purity of its collective and personal life (1:27; 2:14-26). That is, God's eschatological requirement is for an embodied wisdom that commends the community characterized by its merciful treatment of its own poor (1:22-2:26), the purity of speech among its word-brokers (3:1-18), and the denial of worldly affections among its aspiring middle-class (4:1-5:6).

How would Paul respond to this article of the 'Gospel according to St. James'? The historical contingencies of the Gentile mission forced a different accent from Paul. While he too rejects a definition of divine election that claims Israel's special destiny and prerogatives on socio-cultural grounds, his concern in drafting a "spiritual Israel" is missiological: to include Gentile converts, who are not also Jewish proselytes, within the Christian community. Thus, God's promise to Abraham and election of his Gentile children are deduced by the presence of the Spirit and the gospel among Gentile converts (Galatians 3-4). The mark of their membership within the covenant community is not ethical but Christological: whether they have faith in Christ.

CHRISTIAN LIFE

Although Tertullian does not supply a core belief about the Christian life in his articulation of the apostolic Rule of Faith, he supplies a grammar statement in his seminal essay on the incarnation, *On the Flesh of Christ*. I use it here to complete his articulation of the Rule. In my mind, this statement captures the essence of his conception of Christian existence as a new creation, but one conceived of as a bodily or material, even a mundane creation rather than of a form cast in docetic and largely inward ways. In his incarnation, the Son assumes a human body like our human bodies—a finite, frail, "earthen vessel" capable of sinning. That Jesus lived a sinless life is not due to having a special body unlike our own; but it is due to his selfless devotion to the Father, maintained by the power of the Spirit. Likewise, the prospect of the believer's doing the good works of God's will is not so much the effect of Christ's death and resurrection, as Paul puts it in Romans 6; it is by his sinless example that sin itself is abolished, which his disciples may now imitate even if ultimately in martyrdom—the "baptism by blood." In any case, here's Tertullian's statement: "For in putting on our flesh, [Christ] made it his own; and in making it his own, he made it sinless" because "in that same human flesh he lived without sin."[6]

According to James, then, covenanting with God to receive God's promised blessing is conditioned upon following a pattern of new life exemplified by Jesus. The community addressed by James is in a "diaspora"—a place of dislocation where its marginal existence occasions a testing of its faithfulness to the ways of God. James addresses immature believers in particular who are especially vulnerable to the vicissitudes of a difficult life. They must obey this "word of truth"—heavenly wisdom—and practice "pure and undefiled" behavior as the public mark of friendship with God.

Rather than a code of right conduct that demands rigorous compliance, the most important element of the moral universe shaped by James consists primarily of congregational purity practices. While the interior life of the individual believer is surely an important feature of this same moral universe, the community must resist the moral pollutants of the surrounding "world" (or anti-God) order and care for the needy neighbor in accordance with God's "perfect law of liberty" (1:27; cf. 2:1-13). There is a sense in which the rest of the composition articulates more fully what practices a "pure and undefiled" congregation performs as acceptable to God (cf. 2:24).

We note four purity practices mentioned in James that are consistent with the idealized portrait of the church in Acts. First, the legacy of the Jewish piety personified by legendary James is articulated in the letter as a *piety of poverty or powerlessness*, of which the Lord Jesus himself is exemplary (2:1), which may occasion suffering that tests the community's devotion to God. In fact, according to James, the hallmark of religious purity is to protect and care for the poor (1:27; 2:2-7) in keeping with Torah's stipulation (2:8; cf. 1:25). This practice of a community of goods reflects an asceticism that has replaced the world's preoccupation for material goods with a heartfelt devotion to God (4:1-5:6; cf. 1 John 2:15-17).

Second, the concern of a *community of goods* for a radical social purity extends also to speech (3:17) as a principal element of good human relations, which identifies a collective interest in healthy speech patterns as a fundamental moral property of Christian existence (cf. 1 Peter 3:13-17; 2 Peter 2:1-3; 1 John 3:18; 3 John 10).[7]

The literary *inclusio* of James (1:1 and 5:19-20) delineates a kind of spiritual Diaspora that frames a third practice of the community's ethos: a commitment to *rescuing wayward believers* from theological and moral error not only to preserve doctrinal purity but also to insure their end-time salvation (cf. 2 Peter 2; Jude 17-25).

James articulates practices a "pure and undefiled" congregation performs as acceptable to God: a piety of poverty or powerlessness, purity in speech, rescuing wayward believers from error, and hospitality.

Finally, the virtue of *hospitality*, especially to the poor and powerless members of one's own congregation (James 1:27; 2:14-17), introduces a theme that is central to the discourse on Christian life in the Catholic Epistles (cf. 1 Peter 1:22; 4:9-11; 1 John 3:17-20a; 2 John 9-11; 3 John 5-8). In fact, hospitality toward other believers is not only an effective means for maintaining a congregation's solidarity against its external threats, but also the concrete demonstration of its separation from the world order (cf. James 1:27).

CONSUMMATION

According to Tertullian, "Christ will come with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh."

James centers the community's hope on the event that concludes the biblical story: the coming triumph of the Lord at the end of this age (5:7-9). At this climatic and cosmic "any-moment," the eschatological community will be confirmed and vindicated, even as their enemies are judged and destroyed (5:4-6); for God will judge the foolish and bless the wise (1:12; 2:12-13; 4:11-12; 5:5-11).

On the ultimate import of this final event, James and Paul substantially agree. Both assent that divine judgment and blessing are finally creational activities, which bring about the new order of things (1:4; 1:18; 3:18; 5:17-18). Both agree that the Lord's *Parousia* is imminent, so that the convictions of Christological monotheism and the demands of public witness are made more urgently and embodied more readily. The time for repentance is short because the time of judgment is at hand (5:7-9; 5:19-20).

CONCLUSION

James stands at the head of the Catholic Epistles, which are the seven New Testament letters addressed to the early Christian churches at large. The theology of James can be an interpretive guide to the other six letters in this collection—1 and 2 Peter, 1 John (and by extension 2 and 3 John), and Jude.[8]

This conclusion is counterintuitive in the modern academy, which has long argued that the intractable diversity of the Catholic Epistles requires their independent analysis.[9] But the Church's reception of these epistles into the canon as a sevenfold collection commends that the faithful interpreter read and use them together for Christian formation as the integral parts of an interpenetrating whole. Moreover, the Church's placement of this collection in the New Testament canon alongside of an existing collection of Pauline letters cues a mutually-informing conversation between them, perhaps one the Church already had come to recognize is essential for a right reading of an oft-misunderstood Pauline witness![10]

NOTES

1 For more discussion of this point, see my "The Rule of Faith in Theological Hermeneutics," in Joel B. Green and Max Turner, eds., *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 88-107.

2 A few paragraphs of this grammar are borrowed, in somewhat altered form, from my *Community of the Wise: The Letter of James* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 27-34.

3 When quoting from the *Prescription against Heretics*, I slightly modify the translation by Peter Holmes in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, volume 3, edited by Alexander Roberts, James

Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.), as revised by Kevin Knight for New Advent, *www.newadvent.org/fathers/0311.htm* (accessed March 12, 2012).

4 The allusion to Noah is demonstrated by Lewis J. Prockter, "James 4.4–6: Midrash on Noah," *New Testament Studies*, 35:4 (October 1989), 625-627. Prockter suggests that James 4:5, which he translates "the spirit which [God] has caused to dwell in us inclines strongly toward malice," evokes memories of Noah and the flood (cf. Genesis 8:21).

5 See, for instance, Sophie S. Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1980); Howard Clark Kee, *Who Are the People of God? Early Christian Models of Community* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 29-39, 55-87; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1995); and Duane F. Watson, "James 2 in Light of Greco-Roman Schemes of Argumentation," *New Testament Studies*, 39:1 (January 1993), 94-121, and "The Rhetoric of James 3:1-12 and a Classical Pattern of Argumentation," *Novum Testamentum*, 35:1 (January 1993), 48-64. Patrick J. Hartin, *James*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 75-81, locates wisdom in the wider Jewish culture of antiquity. Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011) takes a mediating position and suggests that James draws from the wisdom traditions of Hellenism and Judaism.

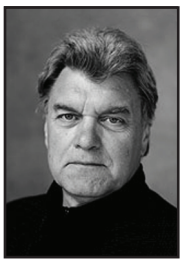
6 Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ*, § 16, slightly modified from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, volume 3, revised by Kevin Knight for New Advent, *www.newadvent.org/fathers/0315.htm* (accessed March 12, 2012).

7 Todd D. Still explores James's speech ethics in "Taming the Tongue," on pp. 30-37 in this issue.

8 The following observations are more fully developed in a series of essays in Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr and Robert W. Wall, eds., *Catholic Epistles and the Apostolic Tradition: A New Perspective on James to Jude* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009).

9 A quick survey of more than a dozen of the most widely used critical introductions to the New Testament finds that not one frames the study of the Catholic Epistles as a collection. Whether arranged by region, date, apostolic tradition, or methodological interest, the Catholic Epistles collection is broken apart and subdivided in different ways that subvert its canonical intent and effect.

10 See David R. Nienhuis, *Not By Paul Alone: The Formation of the Catholic Epistle Collection and the Christian Canon* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007).



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