

## The Epistle of James - the flow of thought

The first chapter of the Epistle of James follows the Parable of the Sower, set in the context of the problems emerging in the early ecclesia. As we read through the rest of the epistle we notice that the same key concepts recur - but in reverse order (see table). Recognising this broad pattern helps us see that the epistle is a coherent whole and not just a loose collection of thoughts with no overarching theme.

| <i>James 1</i> | Parable of the Sower theme                     | <b>Key word</b>          | <i>James 2-5</i> | Theme                            | <b>Key word</b>             |
|----------------|--|--------------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1:2-8          | The goal - bringing forth fruit with patience  | <b>Patience - 1:3,4</b>  | 5:7-20           | Patience and prayer              | <b>Patience - 5:7,10,11</b> |
| 1:9-12         | Shallow roots because of the love of riches    | <b>Rich - 1:14,15</b>    | 4:13-5:6         | Wealth and riches                | <b>Rich - 5:1,2</b>         |
| 1:13-15        | Lust leads to sin and chokes spiritual growth  | <b>Lust 1:14,15</b>      | 4:1-12           | Lust and fighting                | <b>Lust - 4:2</b>           |
| 1:16-21        | Heavenly gift of the implanted Word            | <b>From above - 1:17</b> | 3:1-18           | The need for the heavenly wisdom | <b>From above - 3:15,17</b> |
| 1:22-25        | Bringing forth fruit - being doers of the work | <b>Work - 1:25</b>       | 2:13-26          | Faith and works                  | <b>Work - 2:1-16</b>        |
| 1:26-27        | Pure religion                                  | <b>Widow - 1:27</b>      | 2:1-12           | Without respect of persons       | <b>Poor - 2:2,3,5,6</b>     |

### **Patience and prayer for wisdom**

James links patience under trial with the need for wisdom (1:2-8), and then exhorts us to ask God if we lack wisdom. At this early date no New Testament scriptures were yet available. What was needed was the Spirit gift of “the word of wisdom” (1 Cor 12:8). The apostle Paul had been given this gift (2 Pet 3:15) and it was through this wisdom that he wrote his epistles. In these epistles (Eph 1:15-17 and Col 1:9-10) Paul says that he prayed constantly that others might benefit from the word of wisdom so that they could be fruitful.

James returns to the subject of patience, prayer and wisdom at the end of the epistle. In 5:7-9 he writes, “*Be **patient** therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord*” and draws an analogy with the husbandman who “*waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long **patience** for it, until he receive the early and latter rain*”. The analogy is completely in harmony with the opening theme of allowing “patience to have her perfect work” (1:4) - endure trials of faith prayerfully, and thereby grow spiritually. The reference to the rain is particularly interesting because the symbolism is associated with the pouring out of the Spirit-word of God - “*My doctrine shall drop as the rain*” (Deut 32:1). Today the wisdom revealed through Spirit-gifted teachers is embodied in the New Testament.

James then gives us the example of Job which is not only of great significance for the way the Lord restored Job at “the end”, but it is also a story of the human search for wisdom in times of trial. The central chapter of the whole book of Job is chapter 28 which describes the excellency of wisdom. This chapter itself is arranged to highlight the question of “*where shall wisdom be found*” (v12). James is directing us to the book of Job to get a better understanding of the issues that trouble us so deeply when we are experiencing trials of faith.

The final chapter of the epistle goes on to develop the theme of prayer. Five times it is mentioned in 5:13-16. Prayer is advised for afflictions, for sickness and for forgiveness of underlying sins. In the apostolic age answers to prayers for healing might then have come miraculously; the gift of healing was also one of the Spirit endowed blessings. Today we also can pray for deliverance just as we can pray for wisdom. But that wisdom, learned through the Word of God, leads us understand that we may have to wait patiently for the coming of the Lord before our other needs are met.

### **The danger of Riches**

James 1:9-12 warns us that the love of riches leads to double-mindedness, allowing the Gospel to gain only a shallow hold on our hearts. Lack of wealth can also be destructive if we are coveting possessions or are resentful of those who have what we desire. So James tells the poor to rejoice in the riches of the Gospel, and he tells the wealthy in effect that riches cannot buy the crown of life.

Later in the epistle the subject is opened up in two significant ways. Firstly, in 4:13-17, the epistle addresses the world of wealth creation - commerce and trade. Not that business is wrong in itself. It is just that we can get totally absorbed in our plans and ambitions and forget that even life itself is uncertain and transient. Instead we need to commit our lives to the Lord, living prayerfully, saying “ **If the Lord will**, we shall live, and do this, or that.” Secondly, the epistle addresses the fact that often wealth is gained at the expense of the poor and most needy (5:1-6).

### **The lusts of other things**

James 1:13-15 points to lust (*epithymia*) as the root problem of the double-minded rich man. In 4:1-12 another aspect of lust becomes apparent. The sequence of thought begins by pointing to “wars and fightings” and concludes with a warning not to speak evil of one another. This hints at an ecclesial controversy, perhaps like the contention over the distribution of welfare to the widows. Especially in the face of real need, anxieties rise and inequities are quickly identified, jealousy can come to the fore, tempers rise and criticisms spread. But the language is much fiercer than we would expect. Is James once again taking lessons from the wider Jewish world; “*From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts (pleasures) that war in your members? Ye lust (epithymeō), and have not: ye kill, and desire (zeal/envy) to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts (pleasures).*” The graphic language of wars and murder echoes the Master himself (Matt 5:21-22). Think of Cain and Abel. Pride, resentment and jealousy led to anger, and anger led to murder.

The epistle then moves on to denounce the friendship of the world and addresses the “adulterers and adulteresses”. Such strong language also echoes the Lord’s denunciation of the “wicked and adulterous generation” (Matt 16:4) . If James is speaking about ecclesial problems he is doing so in language that equates ecclesial attitudes and behaviours to the spirit of the age. James calls for humility, for everyone to submit to the Word of God, to purify our hearts from covetousness.

### **Receiving the Wisdom from above**

James 1 moves on from the origin of human failure to focus on the gift of God, the seed of the Gospel, that has to be received in meekness (1:16-21). This gift comes down “from above”. The incorruptible seed of the Gospel was preached “with the Holy Spirit sent down

from heaven". It is this Word that we have to be "swift to hear". In chapter 3 James takes up this theme in a context of the responsibility of teachers in the ecclesia in the young and inexperienced ecclesial world. The opening words, "Be not many teachers" suggest that there was a problem in the early ecclesia of unwarranted ambition. Possibly this was a hangover from the Pharisees' thinking. The Master had warned against coveting the prestige of being a Rabbi or a Teacher saying "Neither be ye called masters (teachers): for one is your Master, even Christ" (Matt 23:10).

The danger for would-be teachers is that they might be too quick to speak, and sometimes speak in anger (1:19-20) or envy (3:14-15) perhaps even seeking a following (Acts 20:30). When a teacher was speaking through the power of the Holy Spirit the words would be just right. But intemperate words and ill-advised criticisms (see 4:11) spoken from human wisdom could cause a forest fire of controversy to rage through the ecclesial world. Worldly qualifications do not count in the ecclesia of Christ because true wisdom is "from above". Its effect must be manifest in our way of life; "*Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom*" (3:13-14).

### **Doers of the work and pure religion**

James 1:22-25 warns us that receiving the Word of God must be followed by actions. He warns of self deception - "But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves". This theme of "works" is emphasised again in chapter 2 with the word occurring 12 times from 2:12-26. The scenario is of the poor who are destitute and needing daily food (v16). Words will not feed the hungry. Faith without works is dead. So fundamental is this that the weighty examples of living faith manifested by Abraham and Rahab are brought to bear on this humble need.

The example of the destitute needing food leads us to think of the definition of pure religion in 1:26-27 that identified at its core, visiting the fatherless and the widows. "Pure" carries an association with levitical cleanliness, and "religion", used only four times, is applied to the religion of the Pharisees in Acts 26. The early Jewish disciples would have grown up in this religious world dominated by the Pharisees, with their emphasis on ceremonial cleanliness (Acts 10:14 and 28). Notoriously the Scribes and Pharisees neglected and even exploited the widows (Matt 23:14). The epistle of James is bringing us all back from a preoccupation with the form of religion to its pure spirit.

Furthermore, as the early ecclesia developed, there was a real chance that ingrained Pharisical prejudices would emerge. The Pharisees saw poverty as God's judgment on the unworthy, and wealth as His blessing on the deserving, so they celebrated the rich and looked down on the poor (Jas 2:1-12). The Pharisee mentality was also to see Gentiles as inferior, and no doubt they would also have considered Grecian Jews as second class citizens. There would have been therefore a double obstacle to overcome in ministering to the needs of the community of widows in Acts 6. Yet those problems would be dwarfed by the problems to come as Gentile believers were admitted into the Ecclesia. Small scale respect of persons between Hebrew and Grecian widows would grow to become a major problem between Jews and Gentiles in the rapidly growing ecclesial world. And this is where the examples of Abraham and Rahab have a second impact. To speak in the same breath of the father of the Hebrews and a Gentile harlot, using identical terms, ought to counter all notions of respect of persons in the sight of God.

Conclusions

The foregoing is intended only to indicate a general flow of thought that links together all the sections of the epistle. The inverted order, though strange at first sight, is a common feature of scripture and indeed of other ancient literature. It is also worth saying that seeing these patterns does not negate the possibility of other themes and other complementary structures.