



The Letter of James  
Bible Study Session 9  
James 3:1-12  
“Tongues on Fire”

Study By  
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**Greek NT**

3.1 Μὴ πολλοὶ διδάσκαλοι γίνεσθε, ἀδελφοί μου, εἰδότες ὅτι μεῖζον κρίμα λημψόμεθα. 2 πολλὰ γὰρ πταίομεν ἅπαντες· εἴ τις ἐν λόγῳ οὐ πταίει, οὗτος τέλειος ἀνὴρ δυνατὸς χαλιναγωγῆσαι καὶ ὅλον τὸ σῶμα. 3 εἰ δὲ τῶν ἵππων τοὺς χαλινοὺς εἰς τὰ στόματα βάλλομεν εἰς τὸ πείθεσθαι αὐτοὺς ἡμῖν, καὶ ὅλον τὸ σῶμα αὐτῶν μεταγομεν. 4 ἰδοὺ καὶ τὰ πλοῖα τηλικαῦτα ὄντα καὶ ὑπὸ ἀνέμων σκληρῶν ἐλαυνόμενα, μεταγεται ὑπὸ ἐλαχίστου πηδαλίου ὄπου ἡ ὀρμὴ τοῦ εὐθύνοντος βούλεται, 5 οὕτως καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα μικρὸν μέλος ἐστὶν καὶ μεγάλα αὐχεῖ.

ἰδοὺ ἡλίκον πῦρ ἡλίκην ὕλην ἀνάπτει· 6 καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα πῦρ· ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας ἡ γλῶσσα καθίσταται ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν ἡμῶν, ἡ σπιλοῦσα ὅλον τὸ σῶμα καὶ φλογίζουσα τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως καὶ φλογιζομένη ὑπὸ τῆς γεέννης. 7 πᾶσα γὰρ φύσις θηρίων τε καὶ πετεινῶν, ἐρπετῶν τε καὶ ἐναλίων δαμάζεται καὶ δεδάμασται τῇ φύσει τῇ ἀνθρωπίνῃ, 8 τὴν δὲ γλῶσσαν οὐδεὶς δαμάσαι δύναται ἀνθρώπων, ἀκατάστατον κακόν, μεστή ἰοῦ θανατηφόρου. 9 ἐν αὐτῇ εὐλογοῦμεν τὸν κύριον καὶ πατέρα καὶ ἐν αὐτῇ καταρώμεθα

**La Biblia  
de las Américas**

1 Hermanos míos, no os hagáis maestros muchos de vosotros, sabiendo que recibiremos un juicio más severo. 2 Porque todos tropezamos de muchas maneras. Si alguno no tropieza en lo que dice, es un hombre perfecto, capaz también de refrenar todo el cuerpo. 3 Ahora bien, si ponemos el freno en la boca de los caballos para que nos obedezcan, dirigimos también todo su cuerpo. 4 Mirad también las naves; aunque son tan grandes e impulsadas por fuertes vientos, son, sin embargo, dirigidas mediante un timón muy pequeño por donde la voluntad del piloto quiere. 5 Así también la lengua es un miembro pequeño, y sin embargo, se jacta de grandes cosas.

Mirad, ¡qué gran bosque se incendia con tan pequeño fuego! 6 Y la lengua es un fuego, un mundo de iniquidad. La lengua está puesta entre nuestros miembros, la cual contamina todo el cuerpo, es encendida por el infierno e inflama el curso de nuestra vida. 7 Porque todo género de fieras y de aves, de reptiles y de animales marinos, se puede domar y ha sido domado

**NRSV**

3.1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. 3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. 4 Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. 7 For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, 8 but no one can tame the tongue — a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9

**NLT**

1 Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged by God with greater strictness. 2 We all make many mistakes, but those who control their tongues can also control themselves in every other way. 3 We can make a large horse turn around and go wherever we want by means of a small bit in its mouth. 4 And a tiny rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot wants it to go, even though the winds are strong. 5 So also, the tongue is a small thing, but what enormous damage it can do.

A tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. 6 And the tongue is a flame of fire. It is full of wickedness that can ruin your whole life. It can turn the entire course of your life into a blazing flame of destruction, for it is set on fire by hell itself. 7 People can tame all kinds of animals and birds and reptiles and fish, 8 but no one can tame the tongue. It is an uncontrollable evil, full of deadly poison. 9 Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it breaks out into curses against those who have been made in

τοὺς ἀνθρώπους τοὺς καθ' ὁμοίωσιν θεοῦ γεγονότας, 10 ἐκ τοῦ αὐτοῦ στόματος ἐξέρχεται εὐλογία καὶ κατάρα. οὐ χρὴ, ἀδελφοί μου, ταῦτα οὕτως γίνεσθαι. 11 μήτι ἡ πηγή ἐκ τῆς αὐτῆς ὀπῆς βρῦει τὸ γλυκὺ καὶ τὸ πικρὸν; 12 μὴ δύναται, ἀδελφοί μου, συκῆ ἐλαίας ποιῆσαι ἢ ἄμπελος σύκα; οὔτε ἀλυκὸν γλυκὺ ποιῆσαι ὕδωρ.

por el género humano, 8 pero ningún hombre puede domar la lengua; es un mal turbulento y lleno de veneno mortal. 9 Con ella bendecimos a nuestro Señor y Padre, y con ella maldecimos a los hombres, que han sido hechos a la imagen de Dios; 10 de la misma boca proceden bendición y maldición. Hermanos míos, esto no debe ser así. 11 ¿Acaso una fuente por la misma abertura echa agua dulce y amarga? 12 ¿Acaso, hermanos míos, puede una higuera producir aceitunas, o una vid higos? Tampoco la fuente de agua salada puede producir agua dulce.

With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

the image of God. 10 And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right! 11 Does a spring of water bubble out with both fresh water and bitter water? 12 Can you pick olives from a fig tree or figs from a grapevine? No, and you can't draw fresh water from a salty pool.



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### The Study of the Text:<sup>1</sup>

Tongues on fire! That pretty much sums up 3:1-12 where James opens another issue related to speech. In many ways, this passage serves as an expansion of 1:26

Εἴ τις δοκεῖ θρησκὸς εἶναι μὴ χαλιναγωγῶν γλῶσσαν αὐτοῦ ἀλλὰ ἀπατῶν καρδίαν αὐτοῦ, τούτου μάταιος ἡ θρησκεία.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.

Yet real tensions exist between the two passages. In 1:26, James says that we must control our tongue, but in 3:8 he declares that we cannot control this unruly evil in our mouth. Understanding these seemingly conflictive positions is an important part of the interpretive process. One can also conclude from this document that human speech, that is, words uttered to or about other people, posed one of the great challenges to faithful Christian obedience in his day. He touches on speech repeatedly throughout this document: 1:19, 26; 2:3, 16, 3:1-12, 4:11-12, 13, 15; 5:12. Relationships with other people depend greatly on speech; with our words we communicate positive or negative attitudes, we build people up or tear them down; we praise them or condemn them etc. This remains true in our world just as it was in the first century world of James. Making certain that our speech is proper and God honoring as believers is just as important today as it was then. So we can learn a lot from James about our tongue.

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<sup>1</sup>With each study we will ask two basic questions. First, what was the most likely meaning that the first readers of this text understood? This is called the 'historical meaning' of the text. That must be determined, because it becomes the foundation for the second question, "What does the text mean to us today?" For any applicational meaning of the text for modern life to be valid it must grow out of the historical meaning of the text. Otherwise, the perceived meaning becomes false and easily leads to wrong belief.

## 1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

**Background:** In the background of this passage are several issues that will help clarify the historical meaning of the passage.

### **Historical Setting.**

**External History.** During the first thousand years of hand copying the Greek text of James a number of variations in wording surface with the examination of the several thousand existing manuscripts made during that period.<sup>2</sup> The editors of *The Greek New Testament* (UBS 4th rev. ed.) consider four places in our passage to contain variations significant enough to impact Bible translation, and thus these are listed in the Text Apparatus of this Greek NT: vv. 3, 8, 9, & 12.



At the beginning of verse three some confusion over the coordinate conjunction δὲ with the subordinate conjunction εἰ (εἰ δὲ) surfaces in the manuscripts.<sup>3</sup> The adopted text then literally reads, But if..., and this is somewhat confusing because of the lack of a clearly defined then clause (if...then).<sup>4</sup> Probably the clause καὶ ὅλον τὸ σῶμα αὐτῶν μετὰγομεν, **we also turn their entire body**, was intended to function as the apodosis main clause, rather than as a second main clause. But the splitting of the external manuscript evidence over different readings leaves some uncertainty as to whether the original wording was 1) **But if we...**, εἰ δὲ, 2) **Indeed we...**, ἰδε, or 3) **Note that we...**, ἰδε. The UBS editors gave the adopted text a {C} rating, meaning that considerable uncertainty exists over the original reading.

In verse eight some manuscripts replace ἀκατάστατον, **unruly**, with ἀκατάσχετον, **uncontrollable**.<sup>5</sup> Stronger manuscript evidence exists for the adopted text reading.<sup>6</sup> The meaning remains essentially the same

<sup>2</sup>Just as a side note. During the several centuries from the end of the late ancient period around 800 to 900 AD until the invention of the printing press at the end of the 1400s, Christian scribes did not make many copies of the Greek text of the New Testament. Some copying did continue mostly in connection with eastern Orthodox Christianity, but the work shifted overwhelmingly in western Christianity to the copying of the Latin Vulgate which increasingly become the sole Bible of emerging Roman Catholic Christianity. In the Council of Trent in 1545-1563, the Vulgate officially became the Bible of the Roman Catholic Church. Gradually the scribes of the church de-emphasized the learning of Greek and Hebrew in favor of concentrating on the Latin. Most parish priests only knew Latin, and some did not even know Latin. Increasingly it became the language of the Church and less and less spoken even on the Italian peninsula. By the beginning of the Protestant Reformation only the highly trained elite scribes in the Roman Church bothered to learn Greek and Hebrew.

Consequently the modern field of Textual Criticism that analyzes these ancient texts to determine the most likely original reading does not concern itself to any great degree with the more recent periods from the Middle Ages forward, since the production of hand copied Greek manuscripts of the NT by the Middle Ages had almost ceased. The work of scholars in this field after Gutenberg centers on tracing the history of the various printed Greek texts of the New Testament until today.

<sup>3</sup>{C} εἰ δὲ B2 L Ψ (κ<sup>2</sup> A B\* K without accents, itacism for ἰδε?) 33 436 1067 1243 1409 1505 1611 1735 1852 2344 2464 / 590 / 592 / 680 / 883 / 884 / 1154 it<sup>ar</sup>, ff, s, (t) vg cop<sup>bo</sup> geo John-Damascus // ἰδε (C P without accent, itacism for εἰ δὲ?) 81 322 323 945 1175 1241 1292 1739 2138 2298 Byz Lect (l 1441 εἰδε) cop<sup>sa</sup> arm (slav<sup>ms</sup>) Ps-Ambrose // εἰ δε γαρ (without accents = ἰδε γαρ) κ\* syr<sup>p</sup> // ἰδοῦ 1877

<sup>4</sup>“Since the vowels εἰ and ι came to be pronounced alike, copyists often confused them. It is possible that a copyist wrote ἰδε but meant εἰ δε, or vice versa. The reading εἰ δὲ is the more difficult reading since this conditional sentence does not have an apodosis (a “then” or result clause), and is therefore more likely original. The reading with the imperative verb ἰδε (see) may have arisen because of the similarity of pronunciation or because a copyist harmonized this verse to agree with ἰδοῦ (behold) in vv. 4 and 5. The Textus Receptus reads ἰδοῦ, which is clearly a change made by copyists under the influence of the wording in vv. 4 and 5.

“If Dibelius (*A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, p. 185) is correct in claiming that vv. 3 and 4 ‘are making the same point, despite their difference in syntax,’ then the textual variants may not be very significant in functional equivalent translations. REB, for example, translates the beginning of this verse ‘When we put a bit into a horse’s mouth’ and NJB says ‘Once we put a bit in the horse’s mouth.’”

[Roger L. Omanson and Bruce Manning Metzger, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament: An Adaptation of Bruce M. Metzger’s Textual Commentary for the Needs of Translators* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), 473.]

<sup>5</sup>{B} ἀκατάστατον κ A B K P 1175 1243 1735 1739\* 2298 it<sup>ar</sup>, ff, t vg sy<sup>p</sup> cop<sup>sa, bo</sup> Jerome<sup>1/2</sup> // ἀκατάσχετον C Ψ 81 322 323 436 945 (1067) 1241 1292 1409 1505 1611 1739<sup>c</sup> 1852 2138 2344 2464 Byz [L] Lect syr<sup>h</sup> eth geo slav Epiphanius Cyril Flavian-Constantinople John-Damascus; Jerome<sup>1/2</sup> Speculum Cassiodorus

<sup>6</sup>“Instead of characterizing the tongue as a ‘restless’ (ἀκατάστατον) evil, some manuscripts describe it as an ‘uncontrollable’ (ἀκατάσχετον) evil. The reading in the text has better manuscript support; and since the variant reading ἀκατάσχετον is a more commonplace description, copyists probably changed the text to the more common term.” [Roger L. Omanson and Bruce Manning Metzger, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament: An Adaptation of Bruce M. Metzger’s Textual Commentary for the Needs of*

regardless of the reading that is adopted.

In verse nine some late manuscripts replace τὸν κύριον with τὸν θεόν in order to clarify the reference to Lord as referring to God and not to Christ.<sup>7</sup> The evidence greatly favors the adopted reading of τὸν κύριον.<sup>8</sup>

In verse twelve, some manuscripts add οὕτως before οὔτε in order to strengthen the comparison.<sup>9</sup> But the evidence favors not including it.<sup>10</sup> Thus οὔτε ἀλυκὸν γλυκὺ ποιῆσαι ὕδωρ does not repeat the exact idea of μήτι ἢ πηγὴ ἐκ τῆς αὐτῆς ὀπῆς βρῦει τὸ γλυκὺ καὶ τὸ πικρὸν; in verse eleven.

In addition to these variations in wording several other lessor important ones surface in comparing the many manuscripts and are listed in the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* (27th rev ed.) text apparatus.<sup>11</sup> But as most often the case, these additional changes are cosmetic either for



*Translators* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), 473.]

<sup>7</sup>{A} κύριον P<sup>20</sup> ⋈ A B C P Ψ 33 81 945 1175 1241 1735 1739 1852 it<sup>ar, fi, t</sup> vg<sup>st</sup> syr<sup>p</sup> cop<sup>bopt</sup> arm Cyril // θεόν 322 323 436 1067 1243 1292 1409 1505 1611 2138 2298 2344 2464 Byz [K L] *Lect* its vg<sup>cl, ww</sup> syr<sup>h</sup> cop<sup>sa, bopt, ac</sup> geo slav Epiphanius John-Damascus; Jerome Augustine

<sup>8</sup>“Instead of κύριον, the Textus Receptus, along with many manuscripts, reads θεόν. The reading κύριον is to be preferred (a) because the combination ‘Lord and Father’ is unusual (it occurs nowhere else in the Bible) and would more likely be changed to ‘God and Father’ than vice versa, and (b) because the manuscript support for κύριον is better than that for θεόν. In this context, ‘Lord’ and ‘Father’ both refer to God the Father and not to the Lord Jesus and God the Father. In some languages, it will be natural to add the pronoun ‘our,’ and in others it will be necessary. Compare ‘our Lord and Father’ (NIV, REB, and TEV) and ‘the Lord our Father’ (FC and Seg).” [Roger L. Omanson and Bruce Manning Metzger, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament: An Adaptation of Bruce M. Metzger’s Textual Commentary for the Needs of Translators* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), 474.]

<sup>9</sup>{B} οὔτε ἀλυκὸν A B C\* 1175 1243 1852 cop<sup>sa</sup> arm // οὕτως οὐδὲ ἀλυκὸν ⋈ (C2 Ψ οὔτε) (33) 81 322 323 (1241 καὶ for οὐδέ) (1735 οὔτε ἀλυκὸν καὶ) 1739 2344 it<sup>ar, fi, t</sup> vg syr<sup>p</sup> cop<sup>bo</sup> geo Cyril // οὕτως οὐδεμία πηγὴ ἀλυκὸν καὶ 436 945 (1067 πόα for πηγὴ) 1292 1409 1611 2298 Byz [K L] *Lect* syr<sup>h</sup> with \* slav // οὕτως οὔτε μία πηγὴ ἀλυκὸν καὶ P 1505 2138 (2464 omit μία)

<sup>10</sup>“Many manuscripts add the adverb οὕτως (thus/so also) before the negative οὔτε. But οὕτως is absent from a number of early and important manuscripts. Moreover, it was natural for copyists to add such a word to strengthen the comparison. The longer text in the Textus Receptus continues after οὕτως with the words οὐδεμία πηγὴ ἀλυκὸν καὶ γλυκὺ (no fountain [both] salt water and fresh water). The KJV, following the Textus Receptus, reads ‘so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.’ The reading in the Textus Receptus simply repeats the idea of v. 11, that is, both fresh water and salt water do not come from the same source. The reading in the text, however, says that one does not come from the other, as does the first half of v. 12 also, which says that fig trees do not produce olives, nor do grape vines produce figs.” [Roger L. Omanson and Bruce Manning Metzger, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament: An Adaptation of Bruce M. Metzger’s Textual Commentary for the Needs of Translators* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), 474.]

#### <sup>11</sup>Jakobus 3,1

\* (ex itac.) πολυδιδ. L 630; (Spec) [Blass cj] (πολλοὶ διδάσκαλοι are replaced with πολὺ διδάσκαλοι)

#### Jakobus 3,2

\* –σει 614. 1505 pc vg<sup>mss</sup>; Cass (πταίει is replaced with πταίσει)

\* δυναμενος ⋈ C\* 614. 630. 1505. 1852 al t vgww; Cyr (δυνατὸς is replaced with δυνάμενος)

#### Jakobus 3,3

\* ἴδε 81. 323. 614. 630. 945. 1241. 1505. 1739 pm sa? (C P sine acc.) (εἰ δὲ is replaced with either ἴδε or ἰδοῦ)

| ἰδου pc sa?

| txt B<sup>2</sup> L Ψ 049. 33. 69 pm lat bo (⋈ A B\* K sine acc.; ⋈\* add. γαρ)

\* το στομα P<sup>54</sup> A 81. 623. 2464 al (vg<sup>mss</sup>) (τὰ στόματα is replaced with either τὸ στόμα or στόμα πρὸς στόματα)

| στομα προς στοματα Ψ

| txt ⋈ B C P 049. 1739 M lat

\* προς A P M sy<sup>h</sup> (εἰς is replaced with πρὸς)

| txt ⋈ B C Ψ 945. 1241. 1739 pc

\* 2 1 A C Ψ 33. 81. 945. (1241). 1739. 2298 al (the sequence of αὐτοῦς ἡμῖν is reversed)

\* 2 1 A Ψ 81 pc (the sequence of αὐτῶν μετὰγομεν is reversed)

#### Jakobus 3,4

\* τα B (the article τὰ is added before τηλικαῦτα)

\* 2 1 A Ψ 33. 1739 M (the sequence of ἀνέμων σκληρῶν is reversed)

| txt P<sup>20vid</sup> ⋈ B C K P 69. 81. 614. 630. 1505 al lat(t)

\* (ε)αν et –ληται A C (L: –λεται) P Ψ 1739 M; Ps Ambr (either ἄν or ἔαν is added before ἡ ὁρμή with βούλεται being replaced with βούληται or βουλήθη)

| αν et βουληθη 33

| txt P<sup>20vid</sup> ⋈ B 81 pc (vg)

stylistic improvement or updating the language to a more natural contemporary expression. The meaning of the text is not altered by any of these variations.

Consequently, we can exegete the adopted reading of the text with confidence that it was the wording of what was first written.

**Internal History.** One background historical issue in the shadows of this passage is the attitude of the ancient world toward speaking, i.e., orality, to use a more technical label. Here a diversity of viewpoints emerge. Greco-Roman education, especially at the higher grade levels, centered on young boys learning rhetoric in order to be able to persuasively convince others of their point of view. But, interestingly, and probably in some part due to this training, estimates are that people spoke only a small fraction of the numbers of words each day in comparison to their modern counterparts in today's western society. The ancient world attached much greater importance to each spoken word than is usually true in modern western society. And consequently it did not produce as many orally spoken words each day; spoken words tended to be chosen more carefully and deliberately. The Jewish culture added to that pattern the religious aspect stemming from the creation narratives in Genesis 1-2. The spoken word indeed possessed power since it was the vehicle God chose to use in creating the world. Both in Greek philosophy and in the Jewish tradition the word took on special qualities as the Logos, in Greek philosophy the invisible dynamic that made the material world

### **Jakobus 3,5**

\* ωσαυτως P<sup>74vid</sup> A Ψ 81. 623. 2464 al (οὕτως is replaced with ὡσαύτως)

\* μεγαλαυχει P<sup>20(\*)</sup> κ C<sup>2</sup> Ψ 1739 M sy<sup>h</sup>; (Spec) (μεγάλα αὐχεῖ is replaced with μεγαλαυχεῖ)  
| txt P<sup>74</sup> A B C\* P 33. 81 pc latt

\* ολιγον A\*vid C\* Ψ 33. 1739 M ff vg<sup>mss</sup>; Hier Cass (ήλίικον is replaced with ὀλίγον)  
| txt P<sup>74</sup> κ A<sup>2</sup> B C<sup>2</sup> P 81 pc vg

### **Jakobus 3,6**

\* κ\* vg<sup>ms</sup> (καὶ is omitted)

\* ουτως P m sy<sup>h</sup>\*\* (either οὕτως or οὕτως καὶ is inserted after ἀδικίας)  
| ουτως και L al  
| txt P<sup>74</sup> κ A B C K Ψ 81. 323. 614. 945. 1241. 1505. 1739 pc lat co

\* και κ\* bo<sup>pt</sup> (καὶ is added before ἡ σπιλοῦσα)

\* ημων κ al vg sy<sup>p</sup> (ἡμῶν is added after γενέσεως)

### **Jakobus 3,7**

\* 3 2 1 P<sup>20</sup> C 322. 323. 945. 1241. 1739. 2298 pc (the sequence of δαμάζεται καὶ δεδάμασται is changed)  
| 1 2464 (sy<sup>p</sup>)

### **Jakobus 3,8**

\* 2 1 3 κ A K P Ψ 049. 69. 81. 630. 1241. 1505 al (the sequence of δαμάσαι δύναται ἀνθρώπων is changed)  
| 2 3 1 M; Cyr  
| txt P<sup>20vid</sup> B C 945. 1739 pc sy<sup>h</sup>

\* ακατασχετον C Ψ 1739<sup>c</sup> M sy<sup>h</sup>; Hier<sup>pt</sup> Cyr Spec (ἀκατάστατον is replaced with ἀκατάσχετον)  
| txt κ A B K P 1739\* pc latt sy<sup>p</sup> sa? bo

### **Jakobus 3,9**

\* θεον M vg<sup>st,ww</sup> sy<sup>h</sup> sa bo<sup>pt</sup> ac (κύριον is replaced with θεὸν)  
| txt P<sup>20</sup> κ A B C P Ψ 33. 81. 945. 1241. 1739 pc ff t vg<sup>st</sup> sy<sup>p</sup> bo<sup>pt</sup>; Cyr

\* γεγενημενους A 33. 623. 2464 al co (γεγονότας is replaced either with γεγενημένων or γενομένων)  
| γενομενους Ψ pc

### **Jakobus 3,11**

\* 4 2 3 1 614. 630. 945. 1241. 1505. 1852 al (the sequence of γλυκὺ καὶ τὸ πικρὸν is changed, or is replaced with γλυκὺ καὶ τὸ ἄλυκόν)

| γλυκυ και το αλυκον P<sup>74vid</sup> ff co

### **Jakobus 3,12**

\* ουτως κ C<sup>2</sup> P Ψ 33. 1739 M latt sy<sup>p,h\*\*</sup> bo; Cyr (οὕτως is inserted before οὔτε)  
| txt A B C\* 1505 al sa

\* ουδε αλ. κ (33). 81. 322. 323. 1739 pc; Cyr (οὔτε ἄλυκόν is replaced with one of these alternative readings)  
| και αλ. 1241  
| ουδεμια πηγη αλ. και (P) M sy<sup>h</sup>  
| txt A B C Ψ al

[Eberhard Nestle, Erwin Nestle, Kurt Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27. Aufl., rev. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1993), 592-93.]

function, and in Philo, the Jewish philosopher, the Logos was nothing less than the spirit of God speaking in creation etc. Drawing upon both traditions, the fourth gospel identifies Jesus as the divine Logos who stands behind creation as its creator and sustainer, as well as its redeemer.

Out of this cultural setting, James addresses the issue of speech and the potency of spoken words. James’ Jewish wisdom heritage had taught him the critical importance of words. He had witnessed enough verbal clashes with the Jewish religious authorities in Jerusalem to realize how powerful words could be. And I suspect he had dealt with many internal disputes and arguments inside the Christian community over different religious disagreements to have concluded that controlling one’s tongue, however difficult, must be achieved if the Gospel is to advance. Thus in 3:1-12 he addresses the issue of controlling the tongue with a central emphasis on its power to impact the lives of other people.

**Literary:**

As is always the case, the literary aspects of a text comprise an important part of the interpretive process. Thus careful attention to them needs to be given.

**Genre:** No distinctive literary forms beyond general *paraenesis* emerge from these verses. The creative use of comparisons of the human tongue to horses’ bits, ships’ rudders, and a small spark give the passage an appealing flair and force the reader to reflect on the small piece of flesh in his mouth. The verbiage coming out of the mouth being compared to water flowing from a spring or fruit from a grape vine or a fig tree is very graphic. Also, the inability to control the tongue in comparison to human ability to control all kinds of wild animals adds vividness to his description. By the use of these dramatic comparisons to the natural world, rather than appeal to scripture etc., James builds a persuasive case for the dangers of the tongue.<sup>12</sup>

**Context:** As the structural outline below highlights, 3:1-12 constitutes a brand new topic in the book, with little or no anticipation of it in the preceding material.

**STRUCTURAL OUTLINE OF TEXT**

Of James<sup>13</sup>

<b>PRAESCRIPTIO</b>		1.1
<b>BODY</b>	1-194	1.2-5.20
Facing Trials		1-15
God and Temptation		16-24
The Word and Piety		25-37
Faith and Partiality		38-55
Faith and Works		56-72

<b>Controlling the Tongue</b>	<b>73-93</b>	<b>3.1-12</b>
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<sup>12c</sup>In all of these exempla drawn from a wide range of human activity (horsemanship, navigation, the menace of fire, the need for clean water, and horticulture), James is pressing into service a homiletic style that employs various rhetorical and stylistic devices. The following are to be noted: (i) Alliteration and assonance are prominent, especially at v 2, where Vouga (97 n. 9) observes the emphasis on words with initial letter π: πολλά πταίομεν πταίει; also the μικρὸν μέλος—μεγάλα sequence in v 5; γενέσεως ... γεέννης in v 6; ἀκατάστατον κακόν in v 8 with a neat coupling and traits of epiphora as well as anaphora; similarly with ἰοῦ θανατηφόρου; and at v 12: ἀλυκὸν γλυκύ, which is a natural pairing. Then (ii) rhetorical questions in vv 11–12 introduced by μήτι and μή, raise a possibility only to hold it up to a scornful denial; (iii) closely associated with such questions is the use of paradox and hyperbole, familiar in the Jewish parenetic literature as well as the Hellenistic moralists. The graphic and colorful idioms coupled with an occasional declamatory style (if the verbless v 8b is to be so understood: ‘Disorderly evil! Replete with lethal poison!’) give the impression of a spoken discourse in the tradition of the contemporary popular philosophers (cf. Theophrastus) joined to the wisdom tradition of Israel. The latter influence carries over into the next pericope (3:13–18: contrary to Vouga [102, 103], who wishes to incorporate v 13 into the preceding section and make it a conclusion by relating the call to ‘the wise and understanding’ in v 13 to the teacher [v 1]. The better view, with Ropes, 243; Wanke, “Zur urchristlichen Lehrer,” 492, is to see v 13 as continuing the theme of vv 1–12 but marking a new section.” [Ralph P. Martin, vol. 48, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 106-07.]

<sup>13</sup>Taken from Lorin L. Cranford, *A Study Manual of James: Greek Text* (Fort Worth: Scripta Publications, Inc., 1988), 285. **Statements** indicate core thought expressions in the text as a basis for schematizing the rhetorical structure of the text. These are found in the Study Manual and also at the James Study internet site.

True and False Wisdom	94-102	3.13-18
Solving Divisions	103-133	4.1-10
Criticism	134-140	4.11-12
Leaving God Out	141-146	4.13-17
Danger in Wealth	147-161	5.1-6
Persevering under Trial	162-171	5.7-11
Swearing	172-174	5.12
Reaching Out to God	175-193	5.13-18
Reclaiming the Wayward	194	5.19-20

There is some probable connection between 3:1-12 and 3:13-18, although no directly stated connection is present. Some of this is related to the attempt by a few commentators to see the theme of 3:1-12 as introduced by the beginning reference to teachers in v. 1, and then 3:13-18 as continuing that discussion on teaching with the emphasis on genuine versus phoney wisdom. This is based on the very questionable linkage of σοφὸς καὶ ἐπιστήμων, *sages and experts*, in v. 13 to διδάσκαλοι, *teachers*, in v. 1. Although lexicographically possible, the content of both passages argue strongly against such linkage. The exegesis below and in the next lesson on 3:13-18 will explore this in greater detail.

**Structure:**

The block diagram of the scripture text below in English represents a very literalistic English expression of the original language Greek text in order to preserve as far as possible the grammar structure of the Greek expression, rather than the grammar of the English translation which will always differ from the Greek at certain points.

73 <sup>3.1</sup> **Let not many of you become teachers,**  
my brothers  
because you know  
that we will receive a stricter judgment.

<sup>3.2</sup>  
Now  
74 **we all stumble many times.**  
if one does not stumble in what he says,  
75 **this one is a mature man,**  
able to bridle even his entire body.

<sup>3.3</sup>  
Now  
if we put bits into horses' mouths  
so they will obey us,  
76 **we also guide their entire body.**

<sup>3.4</sup>  
Note,  
although very large  
and  
driven by fierce winds,  
77 **the ships are also guided**  
by the smallest of rudders  
wherever the will of the pilot chooses;

<sup>3.5</sup>  
so also

78     **the tongue is a small member**  
           and

79     **--- ----- boasts great things.**

80     **Notice how a small fire kindles a huge forest;**  
<sup>3.6</sup>          and

81     **the tongue is a fire.**

82     **An iniquitous world the tongue proves itself among our members,**  
                                   which stains the entire body  
                                   and  
                                   sets on fire the wheel of our life,  
                                   and  
                                   is itself set on fire  
                                   by Gehenna.

<sup>3.7</sup>          For

83     **every kind of wild animal...is being tamed**  
                                   and  
                                   **bird**  
                                   and  
                                   **reptile**  
                                   and  
                                   **sea creature**

          and

84     **----- ---- -- ----- ...has been tamed**  
                                   by mankind.

<sup>3.8</sup>          but

85     **the tongue no one of men can tame;**  
           an unruly evil,  
           full of deadly poison.

<sup>3.9</sup>          With it

86     **we praise the Lord**  
                                   and Father,

          and  
           with it

87     **we curse men,**  
                                   who are created in God's image;

<sup>3.10</sup>          out of the same mouth

88     **comes praise**  
                                   and  
                                   **curse.**

          My brothers,

89     **these things ought not to be!**

<sup>3.11</sup>          Out of the same opening

90     **the spring certainly does not pour forth both sweet and bitter water, does it?**

<sup>3.12</sup>          My brothers,

91     **a fig tree is not able to rproduce olives, is it?**

          Or



92 a grapevine fits?

Neither

93 can a salt spring produce fresh water.

A couple of rhetorical issues are present in this pericope. Let's see if we can unpack them and then make clear sense out of what the text is trying to say.

First, the issue of statement 73 needs to be treated. One possibility is to see this as the topic sentence for the entire passage. If so taken, then the passage has to be understood as a warning to those in the community of faith who would strive to be teaching leaders. Thus the scope of the passage is limited to a category of leaders in the Christian community, rather than to the community at large. Another option, taken by many commentators today, is to see statements 73 through 75 as comprising the initial expression of the passage. In this approach, statements 74 and 75 are taken as setting forth a thesis position, namely the distortional power of the tongue. Statement 73 underscores the importance of this for a prominent group inside the community of faith, that is, the teachers who use their tongue more than others in the group. Thus, they stand as perhaps most vulnerable to failure with the tongue. We will explore in the questions below these options, and try to come to a conclusion about the best one then.

Second, statements 76 through 93 clearly make the point of the huge power of the tongue. These statements fall into two groupings, and are introduced by comparisons to the natural world: the bit in the horse's mouth (76), the ship's rudder (77), and the spark igniting a forest fire (80). The first group (statements 76 - 79) makes the point of the distortional power of the tongue in comparison of its small size to the mass of the whole body. But the two analogies used for this -- the bit and the rudder -- merely affirm this huge influence, which can go either positive or negative directions.

The second section (statements 80-93) continues the emphasis on distortional power, but underscores the destructive tendency of this power. The third metaphor, the spark of fire, introduces this section in statement 80, and is quickly applied to the tongue in the following statements. Two emphases are present: (1) the destructive nature of the tongue (statements 81-83); (2) the uncontrollable hypocrisy of the tongue (statements 84-93). Once more dramatic analogies from the natural world are used to highlight these two points: the taming of animals (83-85); the consistency of product in the natural world (86-93), including the spring, the fig tree, and the grapevine.

### ***Exegesis of the Text.***

The above diagram reveals a three fold core structure to the passage. It begins with a theme introduction in statements 73-75 (vv. 1-2). The disproportionate power of the tongue is advocated in the two comparisons to horses' bits and ships' rudders in statements 76-79 (vv. 3-5a). The destructive tendency of this disproportionate power is the third emphasis in statements 80-93 (vv. 5b-12). Our exegesis of the text will be developed around this structural understanding.

With the repeated emphasis on speech and words throughout the document, we should realize how important this topic was in the ancient world, as well as to James. In the clear background of the emphasis here stands the earlier declaration of James in 1:26, Εἴ τις δοκεῖ θρησκὸς εἶναι μὴ χαλιναγωγῶν γλῶσσαν αὐτοῦ ἀλλὰ ἀπατῶν καρδίαν αὐτοῦ, τούτου μάταιος ἡ θρησκεία, *If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.* Additionally his emphasis on listening rather than talking in the Christian meetings in 1:19-20 is important background to our text: 19 Ἰστε, ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί· ἔστω δὲ πᾶς ἄνθρωπος ταχὺς εἰς τὸ ἀκοῦσαι, βραδὺς εἰς τὸ λαλῆσαι, βραδὺς εἰς ὀργήν· 20 ὀργὴ γὰρ ἀνδρὸς δικαιοσύνην θεοῦ οὐκ ἐργάζεται, *19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.*



**I'm warning you.  
Don't mess with  
me!  
I know Karate,  
Kung fu, Judo,  
Tae Kwon Do,  
Jujitsu, and 28  
other dangerous  
words!**

It is out of the historical context of Christian meetings where speech was not always controlled properly that James addresses his first century readers. In 3:1-12, James returns to that theme with further instruction and warning. This passage is

mostly a warning to his readers, with the expectation that they will take corrective measures to prevent their tongues from causing havoc in the community of believers and in conversations with people around them. In 4:11-12 and 5:12 James will return to this theme with additional emphasis on related aspects of speech.<sup>14</sup>

### 1) *The tongue is powerful, vv. 1-2.*

3 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.

3 Μή πολλοὶ διδάσκαλοι γίνεσθε, ἀδελφοί μου, εἰδότες ὅτι μεῖζον κρίμα λημψόμεθα. 2 πολλὰ γὰρ ππαιομεν ἅπαντες. εἴ τις ἐν λόγῳ οὐ ππαίει, οὗτος τέλειος ἀνὴρ δυνατὸς χαλιναγωγῆσαι καὶ ὄλον τὸ σῶμα.

One of the initial interpretive issues to be settled is whether or not διδάσκαλοι, teachers, is linked to σοφὸς καὶ ἐπιστήμων in 3:13? If so then σοφὸς καὶ ἐπιστήμων should be translated *sage and expert*. But if no real connection exists then σοφὸς καὶ ἐπιστήμων would be properly translated *wise and insightful*. Although a few commentators see a linkage, most do not because the content of both pericopes, vv. 1-12 and vv. 13-18, is of such a generalized nature that it clearly applies to the entire Christian community rather than being limited to just the leadership.<sup>15</sup> What James was doing here is similar to what he did in 1:19-27, he took general axioms on speech and applied them to more narrowly defined settings. Clearly teachers in the early church house meetings more prominently used their tongues, but given the setting of 1:19-22 where the gatherings provided everyone present the opportunity to verbally contribute to the understanding of the Gospel, his instructions here apply broadly to Christians inclusively and should not be limited to a church gathering setting. He is not talking about ‘taking turns’ in speaking. Rather, he is warning his readers about the inherently destructive power of the tongue when words are spoken in any kind of setting.<sup>16</sup>

In the stating of his core principle James takes a slightly different twist than in the two sections of chapter two that began with proposition and were followed by illustrations. Here he begins with the illustration of teachers and follows it with the statement of proposition, since the subsequent comparisons more easily build off the proposition than the illustration.

But even in putting the example of teachers in the Christian gatherings on the table, James does so in the form of calling for hesitancy by individuals to want to become teachers: *Μή πολλοὶ διδάσκαλοι γίνεσθε, ἀδελφοί μου, do not become many teachers, my brothers*. The present imperative verb γίνεσθε used with the

<sup>14</sup>“We have seen that James tends to announce themes in chapter one that are developed in later essays. 3:1–2 obviously elaborate the statements found in 1:19, ‘Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger,’ and 1:26, ‘If anyone considers himself religious without bridling his tongue and while indulging his heart, then this person’s religion is worthless.’ But this essay on the power and perils of the tongue also provides an explicit discussion of a theme that runs throughout the composition. The proper and improper uses of speech are of central concern to James. Before this essay, we have seen as negative modes of speech the self-justifying claim that one is tempted by God (1:13), the flattering speech that reveals partiality toward the rich and shames the poor (2:3–6), the careless speech of those who wish well toward the poor but do not help them (2:16), the superficial speech of the one claiming to have faith even without deeds (2:18). After this essay, we shall see these other examples of improper speech: judging and slandering a brother (4:11), boasting of one’s future plans without regard for God’s will (4:13), grumbling against a brother (5:9). And in 5:12–20, James will develop the proper modes of speech within the community of faith.” [Luke Timothy Johnson, vol. 37A, *The Letter of James: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 254-55.]

<sup>15</sup>Neither Martin nor Mussner have credibility in stretching 3:1-12 to focus solely on congregational meetings, rather than on the more general topic of human speech as it applies to believers in a wide range of settings including congregation meetings.

And we should take note of the way an earlier theme is picked up by glancing back at 1:19–21, and more particularly at 1:26. According to one analysis of the letter (see Introduction), James is elaborating at greater length on the dangers of human speech, which can so easily become a facade for spurious religion. But there are two factors in the setting of this paragraph (which, in our view, finds its natural sequel in 3:13–18) which suggest that there is a more precise background to James’ severe attitude in the topos of the power of the tongue (following Wanke, *ibid.*, 492; pace Zimmermann, *ibid.*, 206). That background fits better into a discussion where (i) “the body” in question is the ecclesial one, not the anatomical one, and (ii) the tongue is used in a setting of the congregation at worship (Mussner, 158).

[Ralph P. Martin, vol. 48, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 104.]

Martin is wrong in claiming that ὄλον τὸ σῶμα (v. 2) is ecclesial rather than anatomical. Mussner does not understand the nature of first century meetings modeled after the Jewish synagogue pattern. They were not modern Christian worship services!

<sup>16</sup>The argument for connecting 3:1-12 to 3:13-18 assuming wisdom guiding the speaking of words runs square into the face of James’ contention that genuine wisdom is reflected in τὰ ἔργα, actions, not just in words (3:13).

negative Mh calls for the cessation of the proliferation of teachers (πολλοὶ διδάσκαλοι) in the communities of believers.

The term teacher was applied first to Jesus: Matt. 8:19, 23:8; Mk. 4:38; Lk. 9:38; Jhn. 13:13-14. In the early church it shows up several times. At Antioch five individuals were called teacher: *Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul,* Ἦσαν δὲ ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ κατὰ τὴν οὖσαν ἐκκλησίαν **προφῆται καὶ διδάσκαλοι** ὃ τε Βαρναβᾶς καὶ Συμεὼν ὁ καλούμενος Νίγερ καὶ Λούκιος ὁ Κυρηναῖος, Μαναῖν τε Ἡρώδου τοῦ τετραάρχου σύντροφος καὶ Σαῦλος (Acts 13:1). In his writings Paul speaks of teachers being divinely established in early Christianity: *And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues;* Καὶ οὓς μὲν ἔθετο ὁ θεὸς ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ πρῶτον ἀποστόλους, δεύτερον προφήτας, **τρίτον διδασκάλους**, ἔπειτα δυνάμεις, ἔπειτα χαρίσματα ἰαμάτων, ἀντιλήμψεις, κυβερνήσεις, γένη γλωσσῶν (1 Cor. 12:38).

By the time of the writing of Ephesians close to 60 AD, local spiritual leaders wear the double designation of pastors and teachers: *11 The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,* 11 Καὶ αὐτὸς ἔδωκεν τοὺς μὲν ἀποστόλους, τοὺς δὲ προφήτας, τοὺς δὲ εὐαγγελιστάς, τοὺς δὲ ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους, 12 πρὸς τὸν καταρτισμὸν τῶν ἁγίων εἰς ἔργον διακονίας, εἰς οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ (Eph. 4:11-12). The construction τοὺς ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους make it clear that the pastors were also the teachers in the communities of faith. In the usual house church setting by the mid-first century the 'patron' who made his home available for meetings might additionally serve as pastor-teacher leader, or πρεσβύτερος, *elder*, (to use Luke's term). Sometimes a husband-wife team function in this role as did Prisca and Aquila at Rome (cf. Rom. 16:3-5). Occasionally a woman fulfilled this responsibility as is indicated in Rom. 16:1-15 where several women house church leaders are named specifically for greetings). For all indication in some situations multiple leaders of a single house church existed as well. The responsibility to lead the gatherings meant arranging for the scripture readings as well as guiding the discussion about meanings and applications after the readings. The preaching role centered more on the evangelizing of outsiders in other settings than in the church gatherings. Pastoring generally focused on taking care of the spiritual and physical needs of those who were a part of the group. This is the reason behind the use of ἐπίσκοπον, *care-giver*, (Titus 1:7; 1 Tim. 3:2) in the listing of leadership requirements by Paul in the early 60s. In Titus 1:5 Paul also calls these individuals πρεσβυτέρους as well, which was a term for general leadership. Where the spiritual and the physical care of the members of the group was split up, the terms ἐπισκόποις καὶ διακόνους, *pastors and deacons*, were used as is reflected in Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3:1, 8, both documents being written in the early 60s within two to three years of one another.

What James seems to be addressing in the late 50s is a substantial desire by members to move into the role of διδάσκαλοι, *teachers*, and perhaps without assuming any additional responsibilities to the group. The prominence of a teacher in shaping the thinking of the group evidently appealed to many.<sup>17</sup> Such individuals would have needed background understanding of the Hebrew scriptures as well as of the oral traditions in circulation about the teachings of Jesus. The closest thing to training of such individuals is alluded to by Luke in Acts 14:21-23 where Paul and Barnabas established leaders in the churches at Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch on the first missionary journey. One of the requirements in Tit. 1:9 underscores spiritual understanding and ability to articulate the Christian faith well: ἀντεχόμενον τοῦ κατὰ τὴν διδαχὴν πιστοῦ λόγου, ἵνα δυνατὸς ᾖ καὶ παρακαλεῖν ἐν τῇ διδασκαλίᾳ τῇ ὑγιαίνουσῃ καὶ τοὺς ἀντιλέγοντας ἐλέγχειν, *He must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching, so that he may be able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it.* First Timothy 3:6 underscores spiritual maturity as being necessary: μη νεόφυτον, ἵνα μη τυφωθῆς εἰς κρίμα ἐμπέση τοῦ διαβόλου, *He must not be a recent convert, or he may*

<sup>17</sup>“The leading role in Christianity was probably thought of as rabbinic or scribal in some communities (e.g. 13:52), but of course it was charismatic as well (1 Cor. 12:28). Clearly it was an office of some social rank (mentioned with prophets in Acts 13:1; cf. Did. 13:2). Thus there was quite an impulse for those fit and unfit to press into this office. This situation posed a problem, for the church had to cull out the true teacher from the false. It is obvious that this task is going on in 1 John 3; 1 Pet. 2:1; 1 Tim. 6:3 (cf. 4:1ff.); 2 Tim. 4:3; and Jude, but one should also include Paul's struggles with the circumcision party in Galatians and elsewhere. While some of the false teachers were doctrinally subversive, many are cited as ethically subversive (see K. Wegenast, DNTT III, 766–768; Laws, 140–143).” [Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 136.]

be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Given the preoccupation with rampant false teaching discussed in many NT documents coming out of this general period from the mid-50s to the mid-60s (Paul's captivity and pastoral letters), one can well imagine James' concern that only God chosen individuals assume the role of teacher in the churches.

The reason for calling for a reduction in the number of teachers is given by James as *εἰδότες ὅτι μείζον κρίμα λημψόμεθα*, *because you know that we will receive a stricter judgment*. By shifting to the first person 'we' James includes himself in the group of teachers. He states a fundamental spiritual principle that on the day of final judgment Christian teachers will face extra scrutiny from the Lord because of having served as a teacher in the church. The phrase *μείζον κρίμα* can allude to either a more demanding standard of judgment or a harsher punishment for failure.<sup>18</sup> In either meaning the end result is the same. In the background clearly stands the condemnation of the Pharisees by Jesus in Mark 12:40, *οἱ κατεσθίοντες τὰς οἰκίας τῶν χηρῶν καὶ προφάσει μακρὰ προσευχόμενοι· οὗτοι λήμψονται περισσότερον κρίμα*, *They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation*. See also Matt. 23:13 and Luke 20:47 for similar emphases. This teaching of Jesus should have been understood by these wanna-be teachers and they should have enough understanding of this teaching to know that it applied to teachers in the church as well as the Pharisees who were the teachers of Israel in the first century. Failure to realize this future reality and a craving for the position signaled to James the lack of spiritual qualification to become a teacher. Therefore he urges real caution in seeking such a role in the life of the church.

This existing problem in church life provided a good launch pad (γὰρ sets it up) into James' teaching about the potency of human speech. He puts his proposition on the table in verse two with dramatic flair: *πολλὰ γὰρ πταίομεν ἅπαντες. εἴ τις ἐν λόγῳ οὐ πταίει, οὗτος τέλειος ἀνὴρ δυνατὸς χαλιναγωγῆσαι καὶ ὄλον τὸ σῶμα*, *For we all stumble many times. If one does not stumble in what he says, this man is mature, able to bridle even his entire body*. The first statement reflects reality. No one of us is without fault. A translation issue surfaces with *πολλὰ* which can be taken either as an adverb or as an adjective. The translation difference is between "many times" or "in many ways." But with either understanding the ultimate meaning is the same: we all make mistakes. The verb *πταίομεν*, *we stumble*, highlights unintentional mistakes, more than deliberate ones, although both can be intended.<sup>19</sup>

The second statement raises a possibility: *εἴ τις ἐν λόγῳ οὐ πταίει*, *if one does not stumble in what he says*. The first class conditional protasis structure here suggests that James considered this as at least hypothetically possible. However, for an individual to live out his or her life without every misusing a single word would be enormously difficult. Perhaps James had the image of Jesus in his mind by raising this possibility, since

<sup>18</sup> The precise meaning of *krima* here is difficult. Does it mean (so Laws, 144) that they are to be judged by a higher standard (compare Epictetus, *Discourses II*, 15, 8; Rom 5:16), or does it mean (so Ropes, 226; Dibelius, 182) that they will be punished more severely (see Rom 2:2; 3:8; 1 Cor 11:34; 2 Pet 2:3)? The English 'judgment' allows both constructions. For the construction, see Rom 13:2; for the idea that teachers receive a harsher sentence, see the condemnation of the Scribes by Jesus in Mark 12:38–40: *houtoi lēpsontai perissoteran krima* ('these shall receive a greater judgment'; compare Matt 23:13; Luke 20:47). Once more, James' allusion to 'what they should know' includes an awareness of the Jesus tradition." [Luke Timothy Johnson, vol. 37A, *The Letter of James: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 255-56.]

<sup>19</sup> *πταίω* 1 aor. ἔπταισα; pf. ἔπταικα LXX; aor. pass. ptc. masc. acc. πταισθέντα (Papias v.l.) (Pind. et al.; ins, pap, LXX; TestJob 38:1; ApcSed 1:1; EpArist, Philo, Joseph.; trans. only the Catena on Mt 27:11 [JCramer I 231] in ref. to Papias [3:2] ὑπὸ τῆς ἀμάξης πταισθέντα struck by the cart) in our lit. only intr.

**1. to lose one's footing, stumble, trip** (X., An. 4, 2, 3 πρὸς τὰς πέτρας; Polyb. 31, 11, 5 πρὸς τὸν λίθον; Jos., Bell. 6, 64 πρὸς πέτρα), in imagery (as Aeschyl., Hdt. et al.) in which the lit. sense is clearly discernible. Abs. (Maximus Tyr. 34, 2e) μὴ ἔπταισαν ἵνα πέσωσιν; *they did not stumble so as to fall into ruin, did they?* **Ro 11:11**. The 'stumbling' means *to make a mistake, go astray, sin* (Pla., Theaet. 160d al.; abs. Arrian, Anab. 4, 9, 6; M. Ant. 7, 22 ἴδιον ἀνθρώπου φιλεῖν καὶ τοὺς πταίοντας; POxy 1165, 11 εἶτε ἔπταισαν εἶτε οὐκ ἔπταισαν='whether they have committed an error or not'; Dt 7:25; TestJob 38:1; ApcSed 1:1; EpArist 239; Philo, Leg. All. 3, 66) *πολλὰ πταίομεν we commit many sins* **Js 3:2a** (ApcSed 1:1); πτ. ἐν ἐνὶ *sin in one respect* (only) **2:10**. ἐν λόγῳ *in what one says* **3:2b**.

**2. to experience disaster, be ruined, be lost** (Hdt. 9, 101; Aristot., Rhet. 3 al.; Diod S 15, 33, 1 et al.; Philo, De Jos. 144; Jos., Ant. 7, 75; 14, 434) of the loss of salvation **2 Pt 1:10**: the aor., as in reff. cited above, provides the semantic component of climactic disaster. But mng. 1 also has supporters.—DELG. M-M. TW.

[William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 894.]

he would be the single individual to ever achieve this. This if-clause here stands in curious contrast with the similar if-clause in 1:26, Εἴ τις δοκεῖ θρησκὸς εἶναι μὴ χαλιναγωγῶν γλῶσσαν αὐτοῦ ἀλλὰ ἀπατῶν καρδίαν αὐτοῦ, *if one supposes himself to be religious without bridling his tongue but deceiving his own heart*. Some folks in that world felt as though that controlling one's speech was of no great importance, and thus a person could be sufficiently religious with just bare minimal control of his words. Perhaps there is a slight tone of sarcasm in James' if-clause in 3:2.<sup>20</sup>

The then clause, the apodosis, draws the appropriate conclusion: οὗτος τέλειος ἀνὴρ δυνατὸς χαλιναγωγῆσαι καὶ ὅλον τὸ σῶμα, *this one is a mature man, able to bridle even his entire body*. The premise assumed here is that the power necessary to control this one small part of the body is adequate to controlling the entire physical body. For this to be accurate, the tongue must possess an enormously disproportionate power way beyond its size in comparison to the total mass of the body. Complete control of the tongue would produce a person fully mature and in complete control of his entire life. This is James' point: the words people speak contain huge power to impact the lives of others. His way of making that point clearly is by comparisons. Thus the tongue as the symbol of words can easily be compared to the total mass of the body.

What was often not appreciated, even if understood, in the ancient world was the extent of the power of human words. James' readers lived in that atmosphere, and this thinking had begun creeping into the churches. The leadership probably stood as a major source of that problem, at least, among the members the sense was that words could be used to further their own ambitions for prominence. There was awareness that words could gain one attention and perhaps position in the life of the church. Thus James felt obligation to put the issue on the table with the intention of warning them that this power ultimately is destructive in nature. This is what necessitates strict control of the tongue.

The modern world needs to relearn this principle, since it has largely lost sight of this spiritual reality. It sees words as a key vehicle for advancing one's own agenda and personal advantage. Their impact on others is largely measured in terms of one's personal advance without regard to the positive or negative impact on others. Unfortunately Christianity has fallen prey to much of this worldly thinking and attitudes. Preachers in the pulpit, church leaders in the workplace, church members in the grocery store -- all through the layers of folks claiming to be Christian there are those who use words in the purely pagan ways of the secular world. James' words thus possess a vital relevance to our day as well.

## 2) *The tongue possesses power way beyond its size, vv. 3-5a.*

3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. 4 Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5a So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

3 εἰ δὲ τῶν ἵππων τοὺς χαλινούς εἰς τὰ στόματα βάλλομεν εἰς τὸ πείθεσθαι αὐτοὺς ἡμῖν, καὶ ὅλον τὸ σῶμα αὐτῶν μετάγομεν. 4 ἰδοὺ καὶ τὰ πλοῖα τηλικαῦτα ὄντα καὶ ὑπὸ ἀνέμων σκληρῶν ἐλαυνόμενα, μεταγεται ὑπὸ ἐλαχίστου πηδαλίου ὅπου ἡ ὁρμὴ τοῦ εὐθύνοντος βούλεται, 5 οὕτως καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα μικρὸν μέλος ἐστὶν καὶ μεγάλα αὐχεῖ.

James has made a strong assertion in claiming such disproportionate power for the human tongue. Now some evidence supporting that claim needs to be given. Three examples from the natural world of disproportionate power will be given. But the three illustrations -- bits in horses' mouths, ships' rudders, and small sparks of fire -- are used in a carefully designed progression. The first two illustrate a potentially positive use of this power, but the third example, the spark of fire, underscores better the way the human tongue tends to use its huge power. It can go in positive directions, but mostly it turns in destructive directions to tear down and destroy other people. This is its inherent nature. And it does its dirty work primarily in deception and hypocrisy.

The first two examples are given as the initial illustrations of disproportionate power.<sup>21</sup> First is the il-

<sup>20</sup>“The high value placed on the control of the tongue here is not only quite appropriate to the problem James sees in multiple teachers, but also very common in Judaism (Sir. 19:16; 20:1–7; 25:8; Pr. 10:19; 21:23; Ec. 5:1; m. Ab. 1:17 — see also Philonic and other Greek citations in Dibelius, 184).” [Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 137-38.]

<sup>21</sup>“V 3 begins a series of illustrations depicting the power (and potential danger) of the tongue; none of the illustrations that follow can be said to be unique to James. Such examples were used by other writers as well (Plutarch, *Mor.*, 33; Philo, *Op. Mund.*,  
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Illustration of τῶν ἵππων τοὺς χαλινοὺς εἰς τὰ στόματα, bits into the mouths of horses. This small piece of metal came in a wide variety of shapes and designs in the ancient world. But when placed in the mouth of the horse as a part of a bridle, the rider could effectively control the horse with this small item. The above pictures illustrate from the ancient world some samples of bits and bridles used in ancient Greece and Rome. Different levels of sharpness were designed into the bits depending on whether the horse was a farm work horse or a military cavalry horse, or something between these two polar opposites. Thankfully in today's world the designs are much more humane than in the ancient world.



James' illustration is very generalized and doesn't particularly favor any one of the different types of bits that existed in his world. He was working off the foundational ancient assumption that still is basic to modern horsemanship: *to control the horse, you control his head, and to control his head, you control his mouth*. And a small piece of metal is all that is needed to achieve this. Note James' way of stating this principle: εἰς τὸ πείθεσθαι αὐτοὺς ἡμῖν, καὶ ὄλον τὸ σῶμα αὐτῶν μεταγομεν, in order that they will obey us, and we guide their entire bodies. Although a few commentators complain that James' analogy does not fit the human reference point,<sup>22</sup> the graphic word picture inherent to the illustration clearly and forcefully makes James' central point about the power of the tongue. Added to that was the relatively common use of this illustration to make similar points in a wide array of ancient literature.

Inherent to the analogy of the horse, the control that can be exercised over a horse with a bit in its mouth was generally intended to be positive and constructive. Indeed human history underscores this potential of human speech to accomplish worthy objectives. Saturating the New Testament are multiple examples where Jesus' teaching effected powerful positive change in the lives of individuals, not to mention the life changing responses to the preaching of Peter and Paul recorded by Luke in the book of Acts. Indeed, I suspect James began with this positive comparison as a way to suggest the potential good that can come from controlling the tongue, as he had



88; Leg. All. 2.104, 3.98, 223–24; De Spec. Leg. 4.79. These citations from Philo are all variants of the general theme that both charioteers and helmsmen need to keep firm control on their charges, and that in the case of horses a small iron bit can restrain them). See also Rendall, *The Epistle of St. James and Judaic Christianity*, 38 n. 2. The reference to χαλινός ('bit,' 'bridle') links this illustration with 3:2 (which has the cognate verb). The analogy is somewhat imprecise (Reicke, 32) because the human tongue is not the agent for controlling the movement of the human body as the bridle controls (lit., "in order to obey"; εἰς τὸ with the passive infinitive of πείθειν) the mouths (στόματα) of horses (ἵππων)." [Ralph P. Martin, vol. 48, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 110.]

<sup>22</sup>The argument is that a 'bit' in the mouth of the human will not enable the control of the whole body. But these commentators seem unaware of the nature of illustrations, both in ancient and modern communications. No illustration ever exactly fits its point of reference, otherwise it could not function as an illustration. To be effective illustrations must come from different spheres of life than the reference point. Illustrations making a comparison function to underscore a central point, while the details of the illustration will always differ from the particulars of the reference point. The point James is making with the illustration is that this small item can control the enormously larger horse. The disproportionate power of the tongue is his point and the illustration wonderfully illustrates it. The mistake of many commentators is the tendency to allegorize the illustration -- something most would condemn as not being a legitimate interpretive method for parables and other comparisons.

Compare these rather misguided observations: "The analogy is rough, so Reicke, 37, proposes to make it clearer: human tongues do not control human bodies as bridles or tongue-shaped rudders do horses and boats." [Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 139.]

implied in his imagery of ‘bridling the tongue’ (χαλιναγωγῶν γλῶσσαν αὐτοῦ) in 1:26.

The second image of disproportionate power used by James is that of ships’ rudders. Again the size of the rudder to the entire ship was tiny, and yet the direction the large ship followed was determined by this small rudder. James highlights this contrast directly with the rudder being ἐλαχίστου in contrast to the boats being τηλικαῦτα.

Probably James had in his mind the image of a large boat like those he saw on the Sea of Galilee while growing up in Galilee. His readers in the Diaspora, especially in Alexandria Egypt, would have had a different image in mind when this material was read, for the Roman merchant ships could be very large during the period of time. For example, the “*Isis*” described by the historian Lucian had a cargo capacity of about 1,200 tones with a hull over 70 meters in length. It could only put into port at Alexandria and had to be unloaded at the Italian peninsula off port with smaller boats. It was one of the largest ships documented to have existed in the ancient world. The traveling of these Jewish Christians back and forth -- often by boat -- from home to Jerusalem to worship in the temple would have expanded their definition of boat substantially. Add to that the fact that the rudder of a ship was a frequent point of comparison with different things in ancient literature.<sup>23</sup>



With this second illustration, the essentially positive role of the rudder is maintained. The helmsman or pilot (τοῦ εὐθύνοντος) would have sought the carefully steer (βούλεται) the boat in safe directions away from danger (ὄπου ἡ ὄρμη). James speaks of the boats not just being very large (τὰ πλοῖα τηλικαῦτα ὄντα) but also of them being driven by fierce winds (καὶ ὑπὸ ἀνέμων σκληρῶν ἐλαυνόμενα). The injection of this trait into the illustration perhaps adds an aspect of the nature of human life to face conflictive forces seeking to make controlling what we say more difficult. This detail may just serve to heighten the power of the small rudder guiding the ship safely through the storm. But it may additionally echo life experience in controlling the tongue particularly in conflictive situations. Caution, however, should be used in pressing this idea.

In summarizing, James makes a direct application statement: οὕτως καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα μικρὸν μέλος ἐστὶν καὶ μεγάλα αὐχεῖ, *So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.* With οὕτως καὶ, *so also*, James signals clearly the comparison of the horses’ bits and ships’ rudders to the tongue. The nature of the comparison is between small (μικρὸν) and large (μεγάλα). In the body the tongue is small (ἡ γλῶσσα μικρὸν μέλος ἐστὶν), which makes absolutely clear the nature of his point introduced in verse 2b: εἴ τις ἐν λόγῳ οὐ πταίει, οὗτος τέλειος ἀνὴρ δυνατὸς χαλιναγωγῆσαι καὶ ὅλον τὸ σῶμα, *Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.* But unlike the bit and the rudder, the tongue can talk: καὶ μεγάλα αὐχεῖ, yet it boasts of great exploits.<sup>24</sup> The verb αὐχέω literally suggests making exaggerated

<sup>23</sup>“There is no doubt but that the vocabulary in this section is unusual; many of the words in this verse are hapax legomena in the NT or even in biblical Greek. It is likewise true that these verses find parallels in Hellenistic literature (4 Macc. 7:1–3; Philo Op. Mund. 88, 86; Det. Pot. Ins. 53; Leg. All. 2.104; 3.223; Spec. Leg. 1.14; 4.79; Flacc. 86; Migr. Abr. 67; Cher. 36; Prov. 1.75; Decal. 60; Soph. Ant. 477; Aristotle Q. Mech. 5; Eth. Eud. 8.2.6; Lucretius De Rerum Natura 4.898–904; Lucian Jup. Trag. 47; Bis. Accus. 2; Cicero Nat. D. 2.34, 87; Stob. 3.17.17; Plut. Q. Adol. 33; Gar. 10, A; further examples in Mayor).” [Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 139.]

<sup>24</sup>“With his οὕτως καὶ James draws his point of comparison: even though the tongue is small, it is powerful. The initial conclusion is simply that James is amply justified in calling one who controls the tongue τέλειος ἀνὴρ, for such a person controls the controlling member. On the other hand, a shift of thought already visible in the metaphors now makes itself clear: the tongue is indeed powerful, but it is not always used for good. With a nice alliteration (μικρὸν-μέλοσ-μεγάλα) James moves toward the power of evil resident in the tongue. Whether one takes the probable reading μεγάλα (A B P etc.) or the somewhat less likely μεγαλαύχει (κ and the Koine tradition — probably a harmonization with Ps. 10:18 [9:39]; Ezk. 16:50; Sir. 48:18; Zp. 3:11; 2 Macc. 15:32) the meaning is the same: boasts greatly/great things (similar to the negative sense of κανχάομαι in Paul; cf. LSJ). The negative tone is evident. This is not so much a pessimistic change in usage (contra Dibelius, 190–191), but a slow shift in thought from the power of the tongue to the evil of the tongue to the need for proper control. It is not that the tongue steers the ship, but that the proper helmsman is often not in control.” [Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 140.]

claims of greatness, and especially so with *μεγάλα* as its direct object.<sup>25</sup> The alternative construction used by a few manuscripts<sup>26</sup> with the compound verb *μεγαλαυχέω* stresses the negative boasting even stronger.<sup>27</sup> This negative tone helps set the progression into the emphasis on the evil of the tongue beginning with the third illustration of a spark of fire in the next sentence.

### 3) *The tongue is destructive, vv. 5b-12.*

5b How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. 7 For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, 8 but no one can tame the tongue — a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

5b ἰδοὺ ἡλίκων πῦρ ἡλίκην ὕλην ἀνάπτει· 6 καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα πῦρ· ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας ἡ γλῶσσα καθίσταται ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν ἡμῶν, ἡ σπιλοῦσα ὄλον τὸ σῶμα καὶ φλογίζουσα τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως καὶ φλογιζομένη ὑπὸ τῆς γεέννης. 7 πᾶσα γὰρ φύσις θηρίων τε καὶ πετεινῶν, ἐρπετῶν τε καὶ ἐναλίω δαμάζεται καὶ δεδάμασαι τῇ φύσει τῇ ἀνθρωπίνῃ, 8 τὴν δὲ γλῶσσαν οὐδεὶς δάμασαι δύναται ἀνθρώπων, ἀκατάστατον κακόν, μεστὴ ἰοῦ θανατηφόρου. 9 ἐν αὐτῇ εὐλογοῦμεν τὸν κύριον καὶ πατέρα καὶ ἐν αὐτῇ καταρώμεθα τοὺς ἀνθρώπους τοὺς καθ' ὁμοίωσιν θεοῦ γεγονότας, 10 ἐκ τοῦ αὐτοῦ στόματος ἐξέρχεται εὐλογία καὶ κατάρα. οὐ χρῆ, ἀδελφοί μου, ταῦτα οὕτως γίνεσθαι. 11 μήτι ἡ πηγὴ ἐκ τῆς αὐτῆς ὀπῆς βρῦει τὸ γλυκὺ καὶ τὸ πικρὸν; 12 μὴ δύναται, ἀδελφοί μου, συκῆ ἐλαίας ποιῆσαι ἢ ἄμπελος σῦκα; οὔτε ἀλυκὸν γλυκὺ ποιῆσαι ὕδωρ.

With this third illustration James moves closer to his ultimate point of the absolute necessity of controlling the tongue.<sup>28</sup> Here the contrast between small and large is intensified with the very classical Greek use of the same adjective<sup>29</sup> to denote extreme opposites: *ἡλίκων* πῦρ *ἡλίκην* ὕλην, *very small spark very large forest*.<sup>30</sup> The illustration is introduced with the very noticeable interjection *ἰδοὺ*.<sup>31</sup> What the spark does is ignite

<sup>25</sup>*αὐχέω* (αὔχη ‘boasting, pride’; Aeschyl., Hdt. et al.; Vett. Val. 241, 9; ins; Is 10:15; Tat. 34, 1; Ath. 34, 1) *boast* w. cc. (Ael. Aristid. 13 p. 164 D.; Kaibel 567, 3; 822, 5; Jos., C. Ap. 1, 22, Vi. 340) *μεγάλα αὐχεῖ boasts of great things Js 3:5* (v.l. *μεγαλαυχέω* q.v.; cp. Kaibel 489, 1 in a grave inscription [ὄν μεγάλ’ αὐ]χίσασα πατρὶς Θή[β]η=in whom his homeland Thebes took great pride).—M-M. TW.

[William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 154.]

<sup>26</sup>P<sup>20\*</sup> 8 C<sup>2</sup> Ψ 1739 M sy<sup>h</sup>

<sup>27</sup>*μεγαλαυχέω*, boast, brag, A.Ag.1528 (anap.), LXXEz.16.50, Ph.1.284, AP5.272 (Agath.); ἐπὶ τινι Plb.12.13.10; ἐν ταῖς εὐπραγίαις Id.8.21.11; διὰ τι D.S.15.16—also in Med., Pl.Alc.1.104c, R.395d; ἐπὶ τινι App.BC1.13.

II. c. acc., boast of, *μονομάχιον* Id.Gall.10.

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1086.]

<sup>28</sup>Again the division of verses by Robertus Stephanus whose English name was Robert Estienne or Robert Stephens in the middle 1500s is unfortunate, and represents failure to understand clearly the flow of thought by James.

<sup>29</sup>*ἡλίκος, η, ον* (Soph. et al.) how great (Aristoph., Pla. et al.; SIG 850, 11; PTeht 27, 78 [123 B.C.]; Jos., Bell. 1, 626, Ant. 8, 208) ἡλίκων ἀγῶνα ἔχω how great a struggle I have **Col 2:1**. ἡλίκην ἔχει βάσανον what great torment someth. causes 2 Cl 10:4. ἡλίκους γράμμασιν **Gal 6:11** v.l.: here ἡλ. may also mean how small (Antiphanes Com. 166, 6; Lucian, Herm. 5; Epict. 1, 12, 26). In a play on words ἰδοὺ ἡλίκων πῦρ ἡλίκην ὕλην ἀνάπτει see how large a forest a little fire sets ablaze **Js 3:5**.—DELG. M-M.

[William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 436.]

<sup>30</sup>Note that a few manuscript copyists (A<sup>\*vid</sup> C\* Ψ 33. 1739 M ff vg<sup>mss</sup>; Hier Cass) seemingly didn’t grasp this play on words and thus changed the first ἡλίκων to ὀλίγον with the meaning ‘very small.’ The meaning is the same, but the change looses the more eloquent play on words.

<sup>31</sup>*ἰδοὺ* demonstrative or presentative particle that draws attention to what follows (Soph.+). It is actually the aor. mid. impv. of εἶδον, ἰδοῦ, except that it is accented w. the acute when used as a particle (Schwyzer I 799) ‘(you) see, look, behold’ (for var. renderings see e.g. ESiegman, CBQ 9, ’47, 77f, fr. RKnox’s transl.).

[William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 468.]



a large forest: ἡλικὸν πῦρ ἡλικὴν ὕλην ἀνάπτει.<sup>32</sup> Although the mountains of the hill country in central Palestine were not thick forests, in the northern regions around Nazareth where James grew up the forests were much more abundant because of the much greater annual rainfall. But the scorchingly hot summers could create situations for forest fires very easily. James' readers, living in other parts of the eastern Mediterranean with weather patterns not too different from what James knew, would not have had any difficulty imagining a raging forest fire set ablaze by a lightning strike or some other similar source.<sup>33</sup>

The role of this illustration is to introduce the destructive nature of the tongue. This emphasis will dominate the discussion through the end of the pericope in verse twelve. James immediately makes that point dramatically: καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα πῦρ, **and the tongue is a fire.**<sup>34</sup> In the preceding application statement, οὕτως καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα μικρὸν μέλος ἐστὶν καὶ μέγала αὐχεῖ, more explanation signaling application was given. Here, in contrast, stands a very pointed elliptical statement καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα πῦρ, **and the tongue fire!** This is intended by James to grab the attention of his readers vividly; it is his most important point thus far in his discussion.

The punctuation of the following sentence is controversial.<sup>35</sup> With all of the possibilities, I am convinced the best understanding sets up the punctuation as follows: ἰδοὺ ἡλικὸν πῦρ ἡλικὴν ὕλην ἀνάπτει, καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα πῦρ. ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας ἡ γλῶσσα καθίσταται ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν ἡμῶν, ἡ σπιλοῦσα ὅλον τὸ σῶμα καὶ φλογίζουσα τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως καὶ φλογιζομένη ὑπὸ τῆς γεέννης. This creates the translation: **Note: how small a spark kindles how large a forest, and the tongue is a fire. As the iniquitous world the tongue is placed among**

**our members** <sup>36</sup> This understanding sorts out the complexity with the simplest and clearest possible flow of

<sup>32</sup> ὕλη, ης, ἡ (Hom.+)

**1. a dense growth of trees, forest** (Hom.+; JosAs 24:16 al., Jos. Ant. 18, 357; 366) **Js 3:5.** The tendency to use hyperbole in diatribe (cp. the imagery that precedes: ship-tongue) suggests this mng. in preference to

**2. the woody part of a tree, wood, pile of wood, wood** used for building, etc. (Hom. et al.; Jos., C. Ap. 1, 110) (cp. Sir 28:10; Ps.-Phoc. 144).

**3. the stuff out of which a thing is made, material, matter, stuff** (Hom. et al.; Jos., C. Ap. 2, 191; Just., A I, 59, 1 al.; Tat. 37, 1; Mel., P. 38, 260; Ath. 19, 3) in our lit. only earthly, perishable, non-divine matter φθαρτὴ ὕλη (as Philo, Post. Cai. 165; Jos., Bell. 3, 372), fr. which idols are made (Maximus Tyr. 2, 3a; Just., A I, 9, 2) PtK 2 p. 14, 15; Dg 2:3. Humans, too, are made of such material 1 Cl 38:3 (Philo, Leg. All. 1, 83 ὕ. σωματικῆ; Tat. 6, 2 σαρκικῆ. Cp. Epict. 3, 7, 25 ἀνθρώπου ἡ ὕλη = τὰ σαρκίδια). W. connotation of that which is sinful, hostile to God (as in Philo and Gnostic lit.; Tat. 13, 2; 21, 4; Ath. 16, 3; 24, 4) IRo 6:2.—B. 46. DELG. M-M. Sv.

[William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1027.]

<sup>33</sup>“One observes, then, the contrast of spark and forest, of the unguarded fire spreading into a roaring inferno. Elliott-Binns, “Meaning,” 48–50, argues that the picture is that of scrub or brushwood as found in Palestine, which is accepted by Mussner, 162; Dibelius, 192; and Cantinat, 172; cf. Bishop, 186, who points to how quickly brush fires spread in the Palestinian dry season.” [Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 141.]

<sup>34</sup>“The tongue is the dangerous fire of the proverb in 3:5b. This sentiment was relatively commonplace in Jewish thought (Pr. 16:27; Sir. 28:22; Pss. Sol. 12:2–3; Lv. Rab. 16 on Lv. 14:2) and it naturally led to another comparison: the tongue represents the evil world itself among the parts of the body.” [Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 142.]

<sup>35</sup>Note variations:

**N-A 27th 4th rev. ed / UBS 4th rev. ed:** ἰδοὺ ἡλικὸν πῦρ ἡλικὴν ὕλην ἀνάπτει· καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα πῦρ· ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας ἡ γλῶσσα καθίσταται ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν ἡμῶν, ἡ σπιλοῦσα ὅλον τὸ σῶμα καὶ φλογίζουσα τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως καὶ φλογιζομένη ὑπὸ τῆς γεέννης.

**SBL GNT:** Ἰδοὺ ἡλικὸν πῦρ ἡλικὴν ὕλην ἀνάπτει· καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα πῦρ, ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας ἡ γλῶσσα καθίσταται ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν ἡμῶν, ἡ σπιλοῦσα ὅλον τὸ σῶμα καὶ φλογίζουσα τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως καὶ φλογιζομένη ὑπὸ τῆς γεέννης.

**Scrivener 1881.** πῦρ ἡλικὴν ὕλην ἀνάπτει· καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα πῦρ, ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας· οὕτως ἡ γλῶσσα καθίσταται ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν ἡμῶν, ἡ σπιλοῦσα ὅλον τὸ σῶμα, καὶ φλογίζουσα τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως, καὶ φλογιζομένη ὑπὸ τῆς γεέννης.

**Expositor's GNT:** ἰδοὺ ἡλικὸν πῦρ ἡλικὴν ὕλην ἀνάπτει· καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα πῦρ, ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας, ἡ γλῶσσα καθίσταται ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν ἡμῶν, ἡ σπιλοῦσα ὅλον τὸ σῶμα καὶ φλογίζουσα τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως καὶ φλογιζομένη ὑπὸ τῆς γεέννης.

**This variation** in commas, semi-colons etc. is occasioned by the difficulty of sorting out the main clauses etc. The original writing of the text was in all-caps letters with no spacing between words or any kind of punctuation marks, which did not exist in the Greek language at this point in time. Overwhelmingly, the vast majority of the GNT sentences are relatively easy to sort out. But in a few instances the difficulty factor increases substantially. And here is one of those places.

<sup>36</sup>One of the issues which is not often understood or correctly sorted out is the capability of the verb καθίσταται in the active voice of taking a ‘double accusative direct object.’ In Greek grammar, when such a verb is expressed in the passive voice as is the

thought.

Now the full thrust of the powerful argument made by James comes through clearly. How and why is the tongue a fire? **The short answer** comes immediately and dramatically in v. 6b: ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας ἡ γλῶσσα καθίσταται ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν ἡμῶν, ἡ σπιλοῦσα ὅλον τὸ σῶμα καὶ φλογίζουσα τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως καὶ φλογιζομένη ὑπὸ τῆς γεέννης. The core statement, ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας ἡ γλῶσσα καθίσταται ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν ἡμῶν, asserts the core issue: the tongue is set among the body members as ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας. The verb καθίσταται from καθίστημι has the meaning here of ‘become,’ ‘be turned into.’<sup>37</sup> The tongue has been turned into the world of iniquity as a part of our body.

What is ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας? Depending on how ὁ κόσμος is taken, it can mean, a) the iniquitous world, b) a world full of iniquity, or c) the adornment of iniquity. The most natural sense is the first one: the tongue becomes the iniquitous world in our body<sup>38</sup> James is arguing that our speech is a major entry point case here the primary direct object becomes the subject (ἡ γλῶσσα) and because the secondary object must match the case of the direct object it also is expressed in the same nominative case (ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας) as the subject. By placing the secondary nominative form (ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας) at the very beginning James not only substantially elevates the emphasis on this phrase, but it additionally stands immediately after his pointed assertion that the tongue is a fire: καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα πῦρ.

<sup>37</sup>**καθίστημι/καθιστάνω** (Ac 17:15; 1 Cl 42:4; EpArist 280; 281; Jos., Ant. 16, 129; POxy 16, 12). Pres. 3 sg. καθιστᾷ Da 2:21 Theod.; impf. καθίστα (Just., D. 52, 3); ptc. καθιστῶν LXX; fut. καταστήσω; 1 aor. κατέστησα; pf. καθέστακα LXX; intr. καθέστηκα LXX; plrf.-κεισαν (3 Macc 2:33). Pass.: 1 fut. κατασταθήσομαι; 1 aor. καθεστάθην; pf. ptc. καθεσταμένος (LXX; 1 Cl 54:2; Jos., Ant. 12, 268) (s. κατά, ἴστημι; Hom.+).

**1. to take someone somewhere, bring, conduct, take** (Od. 13, 274; Thu. 4, 78, 6; X., An. 4, 8, 8; UPZ 78, 14 [159 B.C.]; BGU 93, 22 κατάστησον αὐτοὺς εἰς Μέμφιν; Josh 6:23; 1 Km 5:3; 2 Ch 28:15; Jos., Ant. 7, 279; oneself Tat. 2, 1 τίς ... ἀλαζονείας ἔξω καθέστηκεν;=which one has been free of boastfulness?) **Ac 17:15**.

**2. to assign someone a position of authority, appoint, put in charge** (Hdt. et al.)

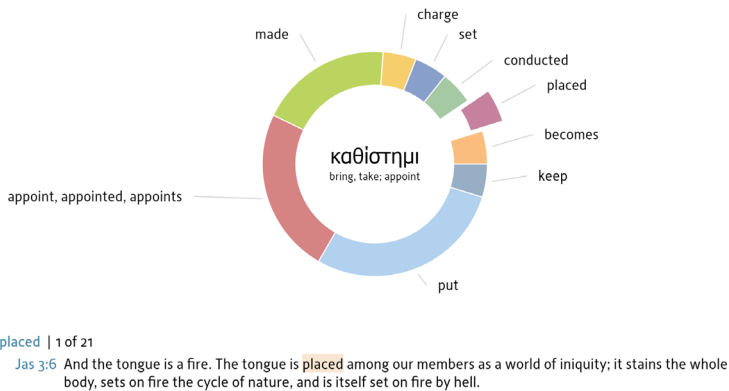
*a. someone over (of) someth. or someone* τινὰ ἐπὶ τινος (Arrian, Exp. Al. 3, 6, 6 ἐπὶ τ. χρημάτων; Gen 41:41; Num 3:10; Da 2:48; Jos., Ant. 2, 73) **Mt 24:45; cp. 25:21, 23; Lk 12:42; Ac 6:3**. τινὰ ἐπὶ τι over someth. (Jos., Ant. 12, 278) **Mt 24:47; Lk 12:44**. τινὰ ἐπὶ τι (Isocr. 12, 132; X., Cyr. 8, 1, 9; Da 3:12 Theod.) Hb 2:7 v.l. (Ps 8:7). W. acc. of pers. and inf. of purpose ὁ υἱὸς κατέστησε τ. ἀγγέλους ἐπ’ αὐτοὺς τοῦ συντηρεῖν αὐτούς Hs 5, 6, 2.

*b. w. acc. authorize, appoint* (Pla., Rep. 10, 606d ἄρχοντα; Vi. Aesopi W 15 p. 83 P.; 1 Macc 3:55; Jos., Ant. 9, 4 κρίτας; Just., D. 52, 3 βασιλεῖς) πρεσβυτέρους **Tit 1:5**. Cp. 1 Cl 42:5 (for δώσω Is 60:17; the latter rdg. Iren. 4, 26, 5 [Harv. II 238]); 43:1; 44:2. Pass. 44:3; 54:2; foll. by εἰς w. inf. of the high priest: εἰς τὸ προσφέρειν δῶρα καθίσταται is appointed to offer gifts **Hb 8:3**. Sim. ὑπὲρ ἀνθρώπων καθίσταται τὰ πρὸς τὸν θεόν, ἵνα προσφέρῃ is appointed (to act) on behalf of people in matters relating to God, to bring Hb 5:1.—A second acc. (predicate) can be added to τινὰ: make or appoint someone someth. (Hdt. 7, 105 al.; PHib 82 I, 14 [239/238 B.C.]; Sir 32:1; 1 Macc 9:25; 10:20; Jos., Ant. 12, 360) **Lk 12:14; Ac 7:10; Hb 7:28** (Diog. L. 9, 64 ἀρχιερέα κ. αὐτόν). τίς σε κατέστησεν ἄρχοντα; **Ac 7:27, 35**; 1 Cl 4:10 (all three Ex 2:14).—W. εἰς: εἰς ἐπισκόπους καὶ διακόνους 1 Cl 42:4 (Just., D. 65:7).

*3. cause someone to experience someth., make, cause* τινὰ τι (Eur., Androm. 635 κλαίωντά σε καταστήσει; Pla., Phlb. 16b ἐμὲ ἔρημον κατέστησεν; POxy 939, 19 σε εὐθυμότερον; Jos., Ant. 6, 92; 20, 18; Just., A I, 33, 6 τὴν παρθένον ... ἐγκύμονα κατέστησε) ταῦτα οὐκ ἀργοὺς οὐδὲ ἀκάρπους καθίστησιν this does not make (you) useless and unproductive **2 Pt 1:8**.—*Pass. be made, become* (Menand., Fgm. 769 K.=483 Kō. ἅπαντα δοῦλα τοῦ φρονεῖν καθίσταται; Herodas 1, 40 ἰλαρὴ κατάστηθι=be(come) cheerful; Diod S 17, 70, 3; Περί ὕψους 5; PRein 18, 40 [108 B.C.] ἀπερίσπαστος κατασταθήσεται=‘be left undisturbed’; EpArist 289 σκληροὶ καθίστανται; Philo, Aet. M. 133) ἀμαρτωλοὶ κατεστάθησαν ... δίκαιοι κατασταθήσονται **Ro 5:19** (FDanker in Gingrich Festschr. ’72, 106f, quoting POxy 281, 14–24 [20–50 A.D.] in possible legal sense; cp. PTebt 183; but cp. Cat. Cod. Astr. IX/2 p. 132, 12 of restoration to a healthy condition). *The two pass. in Js where the word occurs prob. belong here also (φίλος τ. κόσμου) ἐχθρὸς τ. θεοῦ καθίσταται 4:4; cp. 3:6, where the text may not be in order.*—JdeZwaan, Rō 5:19; Jk 3:6; 4:4 en de Koivḗ; TSt 31, 1913, 85–94.—Restored text Hs 10, 3, 4 (POxy 404 recto, 19) (s. καθάρτης).—DELG s.v. ἴστημι. M-M. TW.

[William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 492.]

<sup>38</sup>“Second, there have been attempts in some older commentators to take ὁ κόσμος in a sense other than the obvious one. Chaine, 81, suggests ‘an ornament of evil,’ i.e. the tongue makes evil attractive (cf. 1 Pet. 3:3 Isid. Epis. 4.10). The Vg along with Michl, 48, Bede, and many older commentators has universitas iniquitatis, ‘the universe’ or ‘the totality of evil’ (cf. Pr. 17:6). Such



for the anti-God world into our lives. Earlier in 1:26 he made the point that *μη χαλιναγωγῶν γλῶσσαν αὐτοῦ ἀλλὰ ἀπατῶν καρδίαν αὐτοῦ* not bridling the tongue equals complete self-deception about who we are. In the amplification on this that follows in v. 8 he will assert that the tongue is *ἀκατάστατον κακόν, μεστή ἰοῦ θανατηφόρου*, *an unruly evil, full of deadly poison*.

In the secondary assertions of this sentence in verse six, James characterizes this iniquitous tongue as *ἡ σπιλοῦσα ὅλον τὸ σῶμα καὶ φλογίζουσα τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως καὶ φλογιζομένη ὑπὸ τῆς γεέννης*, *which stains the entire body and sets ablaze the wheel of birth and is set ablaze by Gehenna*. These three traits define very clearly how the tongue is *ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας*. A combination of very Jewish and also very Greek images are used by James in this lengthy participle phrase. The uniform use of the present participle in all three instances underscores an ongoing action that is continuous. The damaging impact of the iniquitous tongue is not random or spasmodic. It goes on all through life. The direct objects of the participles stress both extent and duration of the verbal actions.

*ἡ σπιλοῦσα ὅλον τὸ σῶμα, which stains the entire body*. One should not overlook James' earlier indication of true devotion to God (*ἡ θρησκεία*) *ἄσπιλον ἑαυτὸν τηρεῖν ἀπὸ τοῦ κόσμου, keeping oneself unspotted from the world*. *ἄσπιλον* there is the opposite of *σπιλοῦσα* here. Interesting that *ὁ κόσμος, the world*, shows up in both texts. The iniquitous tongue has the ability to corrupt the 'entire body' (*ὅλον τὸ σῶμα*), i.e., a person's entire life.<sup>39</sup> The concept of 'staining,' *σπιλόω*, (only used here and Jude 23) plays off the Jewish purity and impurity tradition, as is reflected in the *Testament of Asher 2:7*.<sup>40</sup> His Jewish Christian readers would have clearly picked up on this. Their religious heritage had taught them that improper actions in violation of the Law of Moses were what stained one's life before God. James pushes the issue much deeper: your tongue is what stains and pollutes your life. The emphasis of this image is of saturation of the totality of one's life.

*ἡ... καὶ φλογίζουσα τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως, and sets ablaze the wheel of birth*. Not only does this iniquitous tongue stain one's life but it sets ablaze the entire course of his life. Now the emphasis shifts to duration and is based on a very Greek philosophical image.<sup>41</sup> The *ὁ τροχὸς τῆς γενέσεως, wheel of birth*, was a



explanations are not linguistically impossible but they are improbable, for James uses *κόσμος* 4 other times (1:27; 2:5; twice in 4:4) and in none of these places will such meanings fit. Instead, *ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας* must be taken as a parallel construction to *μαμωνᾶς τῆς ἀδικίας* (Lk. 16:9, 11; cf. a similar form in Lk. 18:6) in which the genitive has substituted for the adjective *ἄδικος* (the frequency, but not the structure itself, is perhaps due to Semitic influence; it occurs at least 7 other times in James, all with feminine nouns). The evilness and anti-God character of 'the world' is such a commonplace of early Christian thought that one could hardly see how an early reader could have taken this phrase otherwise (cf. J. Guhrt, DNTT I, 524–526; James's use of this term is one indication of his closeness to the parenetic tradition which also appears in 1 John).” [Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 142.]

<sup>39</sup>The interpretive perspective taken by Martin (WBC) and a few others that *ὅλον τὸ σῶμα* means the church, and not a person's body as indicative of his life has virtually nothing to commend it as being correct.

<sup>40</sup>He *defiles* the soul and takes pride in his own body; he kills many, yet has pity on a few. This also has two aspects, but is evil as a whole.

[James H. Charlesworth, vol. 1, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Volume 1* (New York; London: Yale University Press, 1983), 817.]

Note the greater use of *ἄσπιλος, ον, unstained*, in 1 Pet. 1:19; 2 Pet. 3:14; Jude 25; Jas. 1:27; 1 Tim. 6:14.

<sup>41</sup>*τροχός, οὔ, ὁ* (*τρέχω*; Hom. et al.; pap, LXX, En; GrBar 9:3; Ps.-Phoc. 27 ὁ βίος τροχός Horst; astr. tt. Cat. Cod. Astr. IX/1 p. 150 ln. 35; 151 ln. 1 and 23; Philo; SibOr 2, 295; loanw. in rabb.) *wheel*, in our lit. only in the expr. *ὁ τροχὸς τῆς γενέσεως* **Js 3:6**. S. *γένεσις* 2b; Cat. Cod. Astr. IX/2 p. 176–79; also JStiglmayr, BZ 11, 1913, 49–52 (against Stiglmayr JSchäfers, ThGl 5, 1913, 836–39); VBurch, Exp. 8th ser., 16, 1918, 221ff; REisler, Orphischdionys. Mysteriengedanken in der christl. Antike: Vorträge der Bibl. Warburg II/2, 1925, 86–92; GerhKittel, Die Probleme des palästin. Spätjudentums u. das Urchristentum 1926, 141–68; GRendall, The Epistle of St. James and Judaic Christianity 1927, 59f; DRobertson, ET 39, 1928, 333; NMacnicol, ibid. 55, '43/44, 51f; WBieder, TZ 5, '49, 109f; Windisch, Hdb.2 exc. on Js 3:6; JMarty, L'épître de Jacques '35; Kl. Pauly IV 1460; V 1345f; BHHW III 2170–230, and comm. ad loc.—Or should the word be accented (*ὁ*) *τρόχος* (Soph., Hippocr. et al. On the difference betw. the words s. Trypho Alex. [I B.C.]: Fgm. 11 AvVelsen [1853]; s. L-S-J-M s.v. *τροχός*; Diehl3 accents the word as *τρόχος* in the passage Ps.-Phoc. 27 referred to above, but s. Horst p. 132 [w. reff.]), and should the transl. be the course or round of existence?—B. 725.

philosophical way of alluding to the duration of one's life from birth to death, and was based on the ancient Greek cyclical view of existence.<sup>42</sup> Throughout one's entire life span, the tongue has the ability to set life on fire with destructive burning.<sup>43</sup> James' editors picked up on this as a dramatic way to stress his point about the ability of the tongue to cause harm to one's life not just at certain ages or periods of time. But it possessed this destructive power as long as the person was living, from childhood to old age.

**ἡ... και φλογιζομένη ὑπὸ τῆς γεέννης, and is set ablaze by Gehenna.** The source of such extensive and lasting destructive power is asserted in the final participle that repeats φλογίζω in the passive voice and names the driving power as nothing less than τῆς γεέννης, **Gehenna**.<sup>44</sup> γέεννα is one of several words used in the New Testament to designate a place of eternal punishment.<sup>45</sup> James makes the powerful point that the

DELG s.v. τρέχω. M-M. TW.

[William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1017-18.]

<sup>42</sup>“The tongue affects all of life, from the beginning to the end. Yet his choice of words is still unusual. The idea of the ‘cycle of nature’ is found in the literature of the mystery religion of the Orphics, which speaks of a ‘circle of becoming’ (κύκλος τῆς γενέσεως; see Proclus’ commentary on Plato, In Tim. 5.330A; cf. Dibelius), a technical expression that denotes existence as simply an unending cycle of attempts by people to gain release from the imprisonment of a succession of bodies resulting from reincarnation (Plato, Tim. 79B). By the time of James, however, the expression had probably become popularized and was used in a nontechnical way, e.g., in Virgil, Aen. 6:748, ‘When time’s wheel has rolled a thousand years’; Stiglmayr, “Zu Jak 3,6.” [Ralph P. Martin, vol. 48, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 115.]

<sup>43</sup>**φλογίζω** (fr. φλέγω via φλόξ) fut. 3 sg. φλογιέῃ Ps 96:3; aor. 3 sg. ἐφλόγισε LXX (Soph. et al.; LXX; PsSol 12:3; TestJob 16:3) **set on fire** in imagery, τὶ someth. **Js 3:6a**. Pass. aor. 3 sg. ἐφλογίσθη (Da 3:94 Theod.; Philostrate, Ep. 12 p. 230, 29 by love) **Js 3:6b**.—NMacnicol, ET 55, ’43/44, 50–52.—DELG s.v. φλέγω. M-M.

[William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1060.]

<sup>44</sup>**γέεννα, ης, ἡ Gehenna**, Grecized fr. גֵּהֶנְנוֹ (B-D-F §39, 8; Josh 15:8b; 18:16b; Neh 11:30) cp. Targum גֵּהֶנְנוֹ (s. Dalman, Gramm.2 183), really גֵּהֶנְנוֹ (ס) (Josh 15:8a; 18:16a; 2 Ch 28:3; Jer 7:32; cp. 2 Kings 23:10, where the kethibh has the pl.: sons of Hinnom) Valley of the Sons of Hinnom, a ravine south of Jerusalem. There, acc. to later Jewish popular belief, God’s final judgment was to take place (cp. Just., AI, 19, 8). *In the gospels it is the place of punishment in the next life, hell:* κρίσις τῆς γ. condemnation to G. **Mt 23:33**. βάλλεσθαι (εἰς) (τὴν) γ. (cp. SibOr 2, 291) **5:29; 18:9; Mk 9:45, 47**; ἐμβαλεῖν εἰς τὴν γ. **Lk 12:5**; ἀπελθεῖν εἰς (τὴν) γ. **Mt 5:30; Mk 9:43**; ἀπολέσει ἐν γ. **Mt 10:28**; υἱὸς γ. a son of hell **23:15** (dominantly a Semitism, s. υἱὸς 2 cβ; Bab. Rosh ha-Shana 17b גֵּהֶנְנוֹ רֹבֵי. Cp. the oracle Hdt. 6, 86, γ: the perjurer is Ὀρκου πάϊς; Menand. Dyskolos 88 υἱὸς ὀδύνης). ἔνοχον εἶναι εἰς τὴν γ. (sc. βληθῆναι) 5:22. As a place of fire γ. (τοῦ) πυρός (PGM 4, 3072 γέννα πυρός; ApocEsdr 1:9 p. 25, 1 Tdf.; SibOr 1, 103) hell of fire **5:22; 18:9; 2 Cl 5:4**. Of the tongue φλογιζομένη ὑπὸ τῆς γ. **set on fire by hell Js 3:6**.—GDalman, RE VI 418ff; PVolz, Eschatol. d. jüd. Gem. ’34, 327ff; GBeer, D. bibl. Hades: HHoltzmann Festschr, 1902, 1–29; Billerb. IV 1928, 1029–1118.—B. 1485. M-M.

[William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 190-91.]

<sup>45</sup>**1.19 ἄδης<sup>a</sup>**, ου m: a place or abode of the dead, including both the righteous and the unrighteous (in most contexts ἄδης<sup>a</sup> is equivalent to the Hebrew term Sheol)—‘the world of the dead, Hades.’ οὐτε ἐγκατελείφθη εἰς ἄδην ‘he was not abandoned in the world of the dead’ Ac 2:31. There are several problems involved in rendering ἄδης<sup>a</sup> as ‘world of the dead,’ since in some languages this may be interpreted as suggesting that there are two different earths, one for the living and another for the dead. In such cases, ἄδης<sup>a</sup> may be more satisfactorily rendered as ‘where the dead are’ or ‘where the dead remain.’

In Lk 16:23 ἄδης<sup>a</sup> obviously involves torment and punishment. These aspects are important supplementary features of the word ἄδης<sup>a</sup> but are not integral elements of the meaning. In Lk 16:23, however, it may be appropriate to use a term which is equivalent to Greek γέεννα meaning ‘hell’ (see 1.21). It is indeed possible that in addressing a GrecoRoman audience Luke would have used ἄδης in a context implying punishment and torment, since this was a typical Greco-Roman view of the next world. But since Luke also uses γέεννα, as in Lk 12:5, it is possible that the choice of ἄδης in Lk 16:23 reflects Luke’s intent to emphasize the fact that ἄδης<sup>a</sup> includes both the unrighteous and the righteous.

**1.20 ἄβυσσος, ου f:** (a figurative extension of meaning of ἄβυσσος ‘pit,’ not occurring in the NT) a location of the dead and a place where the Devil is kept (Re 20:3), the abode of the beast as the antichrist (Re 11:7), and of Abaddon, as the angel of the underworld (Re 9:11)—‘abyss, abode of evil spirits, very deep place.’ τίς καταβήσεται εἰς τὴν ἄβυσσον; τοῦτ’ ἔστιν Χριστὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναγαγεῖν ‘who can go down to the abyss? that is, to bring Christ up from the dead’ Ro 10:7; καὶ ἔβαλεν αὐτὸν εἰς τὴν ἄβυσσον ‘and he threw him into the abyss’ Re 20:3.

ἄβυσσος is sometimes rendered as ‘a very deep hole’; in other instances, ‘a hole without a bottom’ or ‘the deepest hole in the earth.’

**1.21 γέεννα, ης f:** a place of punishment for the dead—‘Gehenna, hell.’ φοβήθητε τὸν μετὰ τὸ ἀποκτεῖναι ἔχοντα ἐξουσίαν ἐμβαλεῖν εἰς τὴν γέενναν ‘fear rather him who has the authority to throw (you) into hell after killing you’ Lk 12:5.

ability of the tongue to destroy one's life comes from the supernatural evil forces of Hell itself.<sup>46</sup> Satan uses the tongue as one of his tools of destruction in our life.<sup>47</sup>

With this pointed assertion of the evil resident in the tongue (v. 6), James proceeds to elaborate on how this evil expresses itself through the tongue (vv. 7-12). In vv. 7-8, he asserts that its power surpasses that of humans who within themselves have no ability to successfully control their tongue. Then, in vv. 9-12, the hypocrisy of the tongue in contrast to the consistency of the natural world is put on the table.

**The tongue's superior power, vv. 7-8.** The tongue cannot be controlled by people, James says. But in 1:26, he has maintained that for a person to be genuinely devoted to God the tongue must be controlled.

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The Greek term γέεννα is derived from a Hebrew phrase meaning 'Valley of Hinnom,' a ravine running along the south side of Jerusalem and a place where the rubbish from the city was constantly being burned. According to late Jewish popular belief, the last judgment was to take place in this valley, and hence the figurative extension of meaning from 'Valley of Hinnom' to 'hell.' In most languages γέεννα is rendered as 'place of punishment' or 'place where the dead suffer' or 'place where the dead suffer because of their sins.'

**1.22 λίμνη τοῦ πυρὸς (καὶ θείου):** (an idiom, literally 'lake of fire (and sulfur),' occurring in some slightly different forms six times in Revelation, three times with the addition of θεῖον 'sulfur') a place of eternal punishment and destruction—'lake of fire, hell.'<sup>7</sup> καὶ ὁ διάβολος ὁ πλανῶν αὐτοὺς ἐβλήθη εἰς τὴν λίμνην τοῦ πυρὸς καὶ θείου 'then the Devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur' Re 20:10.

In a number of languages it is impossible to translate literally 'lake of fire,' since water and fire seem to be so contradictory that a lake of fire is not even imaginable. It may be possible in some instances to speak of 'a place that looks like a lake that is on fire,' but in other languages the closest equivalent may simply be 'a great expanse of fire.' In some parts of the world people are fully familiar with the type of boiling magma in the cone of volcanoes, and terms for such a place may be readily adapted in speaking of 'a lake of fire,' since volcanic activity would seem to be the basis for this particular biblical expression.

**1.23 τὸ σκότος τὸ ἐξώτερον:** (an idiom, literally 'the outer darkness') a place or region which is both dark and removed (presumably from the abode of the righteous) and serving as the abode of evil spirits and devils—'outer darkness, darkness outside.' ἐκβληθήσονται εἰς τὸ σκότος τὸ ἐξώτερον 'they will be thrown into outer darkness' Mt 8:12. In a number of languages this expression in Mt 8:12 must be rendered as 'they will be thrown outside where it is dark.'

**1.24 ὁ ζόφος τοῦ σκότους:** (an idiom, literally 'the gloom of darkness') the dark, gloomy nature of hell as a place of punishment—'gloomy hell, black darkness.' ἀστέρες πλανῆται οἷς ὁ ζόφος τοῦ σκότους εἰς αἰῶνα τετήρηται 'wandering stars for whom the darkness of hell has been reserved forever' Jd 13.

**1.25 ταρταρώ:** (derivative of τάρταρος 'Tartarus, hell,' as a place of torture or torment, not occurring in the NT) to cast into or to cause to remain in Tartarus—'to hold in Tartarus, to cast into hell.' ἀλλὰ σειραῖς ζόφου ταρταρώσας 'but held them in Tartarus by means of chains of darkness' or 'cast them into hell where they are kept chained in darkness' 2 Pe 2:4. In many cases it is confusing to add still another term for a designation of hell by transliterating the Greek τάρταρος, and so most translators have preferred to render ταρταρώ as either 'to cast into hell' or 'to keep in hell,' thus using for 'hell' the same term as is employed for a rendering of the Greek term γέεννα (1.21).

[Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 5-6.]

<sup>46</sup>One should note that James personifies γέεννα by using the direct personal agency construction in Greek (ὑπὸ + Ablative case). It is not just the place of Hell that supplies this power, it is Hell's ruler, the Devil himself, who uses the tongue in a person's life for destructive purposes.

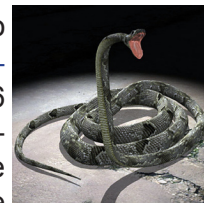
<sup>47</sup>"In the closing words of v 6 the source from which the tongue gets its power is traced. The use of Gehenna refers to the Valley of Hinnom (גֵּי הִינּוֹם, *gēy hinnôm*, Josh 15:8b; 18:16b; Neh 11:30), a place of evil reputation and the location of Satan (Apoc. Abr. 14.6-8: Azazel is thought of as fallen to Gehenna; Laws, 152; but cf. Foerster, TDNT 2:80). It was depicted as the scene of final judgment (Jeremias, TDNT 1:657-58; as in the teaching of Mark 9:43, 47-48 and parallels, which is connected in the rabbinic and Targumic tradition with Isa 66:23-24. There is a good case made by Chilton, *A Galilean Rabbi*, 101-7, for the origin of 'Gehenna' in a logion of Jesus, which seems to relate to warnings about false teachers, as in James). The valley was a ravine south of Jerusalem, but it came to be regarded as the location for punishment in the next life (BGD, 153). It is quite apparent that by the time of the letter cosmic evil was traced to Satan (Davids, 143; cf. Rev 9:1-11; 20:7, 8). Thus, James contends that the devil lies behind the poison that is emitted from the mouth of the teacher who cannot control the tongue (cf. Apoc. Abr. 31.5-7, where idolaters are burned by the power of Azazel's tongue). Such a verdict would characterize a church beset by teachers who create strife and speak evil and falsehood (4:11). Here was also a reason to resist the devil (4:7). In short, v 6 pronounces the tongue as evil—quite capable of doing deadly (i.e., Satanic) harm to the body of believers—because it emanates from the evil one; and there may be a link with the Gospel tradition about leading others astray (Mark 9:42-50) as well as living in harmony. But in enunciating this truth, James has joined together several phrases in v 6 in such a way that its exegesis is appreciated more for the impression it conveys than for its clarity of presentation."

[Ralph P. Martin, vol. 48, James, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 116.]

Interesting! How do you prove the tongue cannot be controlled? James points to the amazing ability of humans to ‘tame,’ δαμάζεται, the world around him in contrast to his inability to control his own tongue. He names off four categories of animals: πᾶσα φύσις θηρίων τε καὶ πετεινῶν, ἐρπετῶν τε καὶ ἐναλίων, every kind of wild animals, and birds, and reptiles and sea creatures. Human kind is taming and has tamed all of these types of animals: δαμάζεται καὶ δεδάμασται τῇ φύσει τῇ ἀνθρωπίνῃ. The most graphic modern picture is that of a circus. The ancient world took a great deal of pride in its ability to exert control over different animals.<sup>48</sup>

But this sets up the primary point of James in v. 8: τὴν δὲ γλῶσσαν οὐδεὶς δαμάσαι δύναται ἀνθρώπων, ἀκατάστατον κακόν, μεστὴ ἰοῦ θανατηφόρου, *but the tongue no one among men is able to tame, it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison*. Human beings within their own skill and ability are absolutely unable to control their tongue. Control a several ton elephant? Yes! Control four ounces of flesh inside their mouth? Absolutely not! This stands interesting in comparison to what James had said at the beginning of this discussion: εἴ τις ἐν λόγῳ οὐ πταίει, οὗτος τέλειος ἀνὴρ δυνατὸς χαλιναγωγῆσαι καὶ ὅλον τὸ σῶμα, *Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle* (v. 2). If one could completely control his words, very high levels of maturity would be achieved. But such is not possible for the individual himself, James argues. He was not the only one to make such a point in the ancient world.<sup>49</sup>

Why? Here James makes a distinctive contribution. The tongue possesses two key traits: ἀκατάστατον κακόν, μεστὴ ἰοῦ θανατηφόρου, *an unruly evil, full of deadly poison*. “ἀκατάστατος is the opposite of δεδαμασμένος.”<sup>50</sup> With the use of the noun in 3:16 ἀκαταστασία with the adjective form here ἀκατάστατον, the picture of chaos and utter unruliness emerges. The second image is really graphic: μεστὴ ἰοῦ θανατηφόρου. This is the picture of a deadly viper snake poised and ready to spit out its venom on its victims. These two very negative characteristics of the tongue grow out of the basic contention made in v. 6 that the tongue is a fire, that is, an iniquitous world in our life. The fuel that Hell provides the tongue is its poison.



What is James pointing to here? He first said (1:26) that the tongue must be controlled. Also, fully controlling it means becoming very mature (τέλειος ἀνὴρ). But now he says that we cannot control it. Most are convinced that 1:26 signals the ultimate solution to controlling the tongue in James’ view: ἡ θρησκεία, *devotion to God*. If we are genuinely committed to God, then God’s strength and leadership become the difference between controlling and not controlling our words. Jesus made a similar point in Matt. 12:34-37 even more pointedly,

34 γεννήματα ἐχιδῶν, πῶς δύνασθε ἀγαθὰ λαλεῖν πονηροὶ ὄντες; **ἐκ γὰρ τοῦ περισσεύματος τῆς καρδίας τὸ στόμα λαλεῖ.** 35 ὁ ἀγαθὸς ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ θησαυροῦ ἐκβάλλει ἀγαθὰ, καὶ ὁ πονηρὸς ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ θησαυροῦ ἐκβάλλει πονηρά. 36 λέγω δὲ ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶν ῥῆμα ἀργὸν ὃ λαλήσουσιν οἱ ἄνθρωποι

<sup>48</sup>“James uses v 7 to set up a vivid—but axiomatic—contrast to the idea in v 8 (πᾶς placed before a noun without the definite article carries the sense ‘all you care to mention’; BDF §275.3). The mention of φύσις (species) refers to ‘kind’ (KJV/AV), and he fourfold list of James may be based on Gen 1:26; 9:2; cf. 1 Enoch 7.5; Philo, *De Spec. Leg.* 4.110–16; θηρίον, ‘beast,’ probably referring to undomesticated animals (Foerster, TDNT 3:133–35); πετεινόν, ‘bird’; ἐρπετόν, ‘reptile’; ἐνάλιον, ‘sea creature’ (a hapax legomenon, although common in classical Greek writing; cf. Sophocles, *Antig.* 345, where biblical Greek prefers ἰχθύς).

“The ancient world took pride in humanity’s ability to tame and control the animal kingdom. Ps 8:6–8 conveys the idea of humankind’s superiority over animals both in terms of what is hunted and slain for food and what is domesticated for work and pleasure (Adamson, 145). The Greeks believed that human reason overcame the strength and speed of animals (Cicero, *De natura deorum* 2.60.151–58; Sophocles, *Antig.* 342; Philo, *Decal.* 113; *Leg. All.* 2.104; *Op. Mund.* 83–86, 148; see Mayor, 115–16). The use of the perfect and the present of the verb δαμάζειν (to ‘subdue,’ to ‘tame,’ found only elsewhere in the NT in Mark 5:4) supports the contention that the animal world has been under the control of the human world since the beginning (Moo, 126). τῇ φύσει τῇ ἀνθρωπίνῃ follows the two instances of the verb in the passive voice. This phrase is probably best classed as an instrumental dative (BDF §191.5). James in no way is contesting the fact (taken in his day to be an accepted opinion) that humankind rules over the animal world. He has included this illustration to set up a contrast to what follows in v 8. The placement of ἀνθρώπινος at the end of the phrase may be for emphasis.”

[Ralph P. Martin, vol. 48, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 116-17.]

<sup>49</sup>“The thought that the tongue is one ‘animal’ that cannot be controlled was quite common in the literature of Hellenistic and Jewish ethics (Plutarch, *De Garrul* 14; Lev. Rab. 16 on Lev 14:4; Deut. Rab. 5:10 on Deut 17:4; Prov 10:20; 13:3; 12:18; 15:2,4; 21:3; 31:26; Sir 14:1; 19:6; 25:8).” [Ralph P. Martin, vol. 48, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 117.]

<sup>50</sup>James Hardy Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James*, International Critical Commentary (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1916), 241.

ἀποδώσουσιν περὶ αὐτοῦ λόγον ἐν ἡμέρᾳ κρίσεως· 37 ἐκ γὰρ τῶν λόγων σου δικαιωθήσῃ, καὶ ἐκ τῶν λόγων σου καταδικασθήσῃ.

34 You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? **For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.** 35 The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. 36 I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; 37 for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

What dominates our life deep within and is then expressed outwardly by words signals who we are spiritually before God. This is a good description of ἡ θρησκεία, **religion**, which stresses the outward expression of inward commitment to God.<sup>51</sup>

**The tongue’s hypocrisy, vv. 9-12.** The spitting out of evil by the tongue most often takes on hypocrisy in the setting of religion.<sup>52</sup> James sets up the point in vv. 9-10a: ἐν αὐτῇ εὐλογοῦμεν τὸν κύριον καὶ πατέρα καὶ ἐν αὐτῇ καταρώμεθα τοὺς ἀνθρώπους τοὺς καθ’ ὁμοίωσιν θεοῦ γεγονότας, ἐκ τοῦ αὐτοῦ στόματος ἐξέρχεται εὐλογία καὶ κατάρα, **with it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men made in the image of God. Out of the same mouth comes blessing and curse.**<sup>53</sup> Over the years I have paraphrased James’ words this way: At church we sing oh how I love Jesus and then go home to have roast preacher for dinner! Clearly James is speaking here to religious oriented people, not about humanity in general.

The two sets of terms εὐλογοῦμεν / εὐλογία and καταρώμεθα / κατάρα defines the hypocrisy.<sup>54</sup> The language of blessing echoes Jewish liturgical expression in the temple and in home worship. Also the Friday evening synagogue gathering began and closed with prayers that stressed εὐλογία of God. But the idea extends beyond times of gathered meetings with fellow worshippers. The axiomatic nature of the expression in **vv. 9-10a underscore a general application to life in general.**<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup>For a detailed discussion of this theme, see my lecture “Frömmigkeit in den urchristlichen Gemeinden” first delivered in German, and later revised and presented in English in the US as “Piety in Primitive Christianity.” These are available under *Lectures* at cranfordville.com.

<sup>52</sup>“As a final, climactic indictment of the tongue, James attributes to it that ‘doubleness’ which he so deplors. The inconsistent, unstable wavering of the double-minded man (1:7–8), which is manifested in an attitude of partiality (cf. 2:4) and a failure to produce justifying works (2:14–26), also comes to expression in the tongue. Like Bunyan’s ‘Talkative’, who was ‘a saint abroad and a devil at home’, the double-minded man shows by the contradictory nature of his speech that his faith lacks focus and stability.” [Douglas J. Moo, vol. 16, *James: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 132.]

<sup>53</sup>“It is interesting to note that the pronoun ‘we’ recurs (from 3:1–2). This may be (i) an identification of James with his readers and also a sign that the weakness of double talk goes with being human. It may also imply that teachers are in the author’s sights, though they are not the only ones subject to this malady: all church members must guard against this sin (see Dibelius), even if the primary target audience seems to be the church’s teachers. Or (ii) the first person plural idiom may be derived from liturgical usage.” [Ralph P. Martin, vol. 48, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 119.]

<sup>54</sup>“It is deplorable that the same instrument is used to bless the Lord and Father and to curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. The blessing of God was a prominent part of Jewish devotion. ‘The Holy One, Blessed be He’ is one of the most frequent descriptions of God in rabbinic literature and ‘the eighteen benedictions’, a liturgical formula used daily, concluded each of its parts with a blessing of God. Christians, of course, also blessed God in prayer (cf. Eph. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:3). It is rare to designate God as Lord and Father (although see 1 Chr. 29:10; Isa. 63:16), but it is doubtful whether James intends anything special by these titles. This activity of blessing, in which we praise and honour God, is cited by James as the highest, purest, most noble form of speech. The lowest, filthiest, most ignoble form of speech, on the other hand, is cursing. The word of the curse, which is the opposite of blessing (cf. Deut. 30:19), was seen to have great power in the ancient world. For to curse someone is not just to swear at them; it is to desire that they be cut off from God and experience eternal punishment. Jesus prohibited his disciples from cursing others; indeed, they were to ‘bless those who curse you’ (Luke 6:28; cf. Rom. 12:14). What makes cursing particularly heinous is that the one whom we pronounce damned has been made in God’s image (James’ further allusion to Gen. 1:26 [cf. v. 7] is clear). The rabbis cautioned against cursing for the same reason: one should not say ‘“Let my neighbour be put to shame”—for then you put to shame one who is in the image of God’ (Bereshith Rabba 24, on Gen. 5:1).” [Douglas J. Moo, vol. 16, *James: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 132-33.]

<sup>55</sup>“The opposite of ‘blessing,’ namely, the words of the curse (Deut 30:19), is another common theme in the OT (Gen 9:25; 49:7; Judg 5:23; 9:20; Prov 11:26; 24:24; 26:2; Eccl 7:21; Sir 4:5), though there is a certain critical attitude taken to cursing (Davids, 146). The NT writers speak out against cursing (Luke 6:28; Rom 12:14), but Paul sometimes comes close to cursing others (1 Cor 5:5; Rom 3:8; Gal 5:12). There is evidence, moreover, to support Davids’ contention (146) that formal cursing (that is, the aiming of anathemas at those to be excluded from the church) was not strictly forbidden in the early communities (1 Cor 16:22; cf. Acts 5:1–11; 8:20; Rev 22:18–19). Thus, the prohibition of cursing was aimed at those who struck out in anger (see Matt 5:21–26) against

The hypocrisy is heightened because James characterizes τοὺς ἀνθρώπους as those τοὺς καθ' ὁμοίωσιν θεοῦ γεγονότας.<sup>56</sup> The people we 'banish to Hell' with our curse are created by God, and deserve respect and just treatment because of this. Their actions and attitudes may be reprehensible, but as divinely created human beings we must treat them justly. Angry words leveled at them are completely out of place for people claiming to be devoted to the God who made them.

If James' readers had not gotten the idea by this point, he makes it absolutely clear that such contradictory words are wrong: οὐ χρή, ἀδελφοί μου, ταῦτα οὕτως γίνεσθαι, *not acceptable, my brothers, for these things to be so!*<sup>57</sup> These words are intense and express strong indignation from James. Such behavior is to be condemned and eliminated completely from the lives of people claiming to love God through Jesus Christ.

In order to re-enforce his point once again James turns to the natural world with comparisons of the consistency of that world against the inconsistency of the human tongue (vv. 11-12): 11 μήτι ἢ πηγὴ ἐκ τῆς αὐτῆς ὀπῆς βρῦει τὸ γλυκὺ καὶ τὸ πικρὸν; 12 μὴ δύναται, ἀδελφοί μου, συκῆ ἐλαίας ποιῆσαι ἢ ἄμπελος σῦκα; οὔτε ἄλυκὸν γλυκὺ ποιῆσαι ὕδωρ, 11 *Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.* He begins with an obvious allusion to the tongue (ἐκ τοῦ αὐτοῦ στόματος, *out of the same mouth*) in ἐκ τῆς αὐτῆς ὀπῆς, *out of the same opening*. ὀπή, *opening*, is more appropriate for πηγὴ, *spring*, than στόμα, *mouth*. From the same spring one would not find that it βρῦει τὸ γλυκὺ καὶ τὸ πικρὸν, *pours out sweet water and bitter water*. One or the other, but not both coming out of the same spring. The intensive negative μήτι sets up the rhetorical question as absolutely expecting the readers to respond with, "Of course not, everyone knows better than that!"

Next he moves to plant life: μὴ δύναται, ἀδελφοί μου, συκῆ ἐλαίας ποιῆσαι ἢ ἄμπελος σῦκα; *Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs?* These three plants, olives, figs, and grapes, were common to the Mediterranean world and thus made natural illustrations. Clearly it would be totally illogical to come to a fig tree expecting to gather olives from this tree. A fig tree produces figs, a grapevine produces grapes, not figs! Although simple observation of the natural world would have made James' point clear, he may additionally have had some of Jesus' teaching in mind as well.<sup>58</sup> At the end he returns to the issue of water: οὔτε ἄλυκὸν γλυκὺ ποιῆσαι ὕδωρ, *No more can salt water yield fresh*. Most likely the image of the πηγὴ, *spring*, is implied in his words.<sup>59</sup> And thus the statement provides closure to the central point being made

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other Christians, especially when disputes flared up during internal squabbles. Such a practice could easily characterize those who are pictured as double-minded (1:7, 8), who manifest an attitude of partiality (2:4), and who accept the lopsided doctrine of faith without deeds (2:14–26; see Moo, 128; also Dibelius, 203)." [Ralph P. Martin, vol. 48, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 118-19.]

<sup>56</sup>"made according to God's likeness: Rather than the second perfect participle *gegonotas*, some MSS have the more usual first perfect *gegenemenous* or the second aorist *genomenous*; there is no great difference in meaning. James is clearly alluding to Gen 1:26–28, which has God making the human *kat' eikona hemēteran kai kath' homoiosin* ("according to our image and likeness"), so that the human could rule over 'the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and the creatures of all the earth and the serpents crawling on the earth' (1:26). The allusion anticipated by 3:7 is here made explicit." [Luke Timothy Johnson, vol. 37A, *The Letter of James: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 262.]

<sup>57</sup>"James uses the impersonal verb *chrē* with the accusative + infinitive construction (Od. 6:207; Ep. Arist. 231; Xenophon, Symposium 4:47). This is the only example of the usage in the NT and wonderfully captures the moralist's sense of outrage at 'what ought not to be.' For the theme of inconsistency in speech, see, e.g., Plato, Laws 659A; Philo, Decalogue 93; Prov 18:21; Sir 5:9–13; 28:12. Here 'double-mindedness' (1:8) is revealed in being 'double-tongued' (see Did. 2:4; Barn. 19:7)." [Luke Timothy Johnson, vol. 37A, *The Letter of James: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 262.]

<sup>58</sup>"The teaching of Jesus provides parallels which may have been in their oral form a basis for James's ideas (Mt. 7:16–20 par. Lk. 6:43–45; cf. Mt. 12:33–35 par. Lk. 6:45). While the teaching in James is not entirely parallel (the gospel sayings concern good and bad people and their respective works), a similar point occurs: a good nature or impulse will not produce evil, but only good, as a tree produces only according to its nature." [Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 148.]

<sup>59</sup>"Now the previous illustration of springs is brought into line with the agricultural illustration. The vocabulary has shifted back to the more usual ἄλυκὸν from πικρὸν. The choice of construction is admittedly difficult; the ἄλυκὸν must stand for a brackish spring and the ποιῆσαι, at best unusual for what a spring does, must have been chosen to make the parallel with v 12a explicit. Nevertheless, the parallel does come across: springs like plants produce according to their natures (cf. Gn. 1:11).



about the consistency of the natural world over against the inconsistency of the tongue.

## 2. What does the text mean to us today?

Does this passage relate to the modern world? The better question is How does it not relate? I'm not sure there is an area where it does relate in regards to our speech. To be clear, James is speaking to Christians who claim commitment to Christ. A pagan world would have little grasp of what James is pointing toward with his very religious perspective on the power of human words. The pagan world around the Jewish Christians in the Diaspora would not have understood any of what James said beyond his use of ideas and images common in the secular literature of that day. Any educated Greek would claim that high levels of controlling one's tongue are achievable with proper training and self-discipline. Maybe not complete control, but very high levels of control. Difficult to do? Yes! But one just has to work at it by developing self-control.

James' response to such thinking is absolutely clear: τὴν γλῶσσαν οὐδεὶς δαμάσσει δύνатаι ἀνθρώπων, [the tongue no one among men is able to tame](#). All the self-discipline and training in the world is doomed ultimately to fail! It is only in authentic θρησκεία that one can bring the tongue under control (cf. 1:26). What lies down inside us in terms of sincere surrender to the control by God of our lives is the difference between success or failure in bridling our tongue. The urgency of the issue is extreme: the tongue is poised like a deadly viper ready to strike its victim with deadly poison. That poison comes straight out of the pits of Gehenna!

In the modern world the destructiveness of human words is all too apparent. And ironically never more apparent than during a political campaign season! The lure of Christians to get drawn into such ungodly use of words is almost irresistible! But that subjects us to the correct charge of hypocrisy: ἐν αὐτῇ εὐλογοῦμεν τὸν κύριον καὶ πατέρα καὶ ἐν αὐτῇ καταρώμεθα τοὺς ἀνθρώπους τοὺς καθ' ὁμοίωσιν θεοῦ γεγονότας, ἐκ τοῦ αὐτοῦ στόματος ἐξέρχεται εὐλογία καὶ κατάρα, [With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing](#). James voices not only his outrage at such behavior, but God's as well: οὐ χρεὶ, ἀδελφοί μου, ταῦτα οὕτως γίνεσθαι, [My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so](#).

God help us to clean up our speech and make it consistently appropriate both toward God and toward others!

- 1) How anxious are you to be a teacher in the church?
- 2) How powerful are words, in your estimation?
- 3) Is your tongue prone toward evil words?
- 4) How consistent is your language between church and the work place?
- 5) Do your words reflect understanding of who people are in God's eyes?

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“The major problem with this phrase is what the text originally read. Several texts read οὕτως οὐδὲ ἀλυκόν (κ C2 it. Vg syr.) or οὕτως οὐδεμία πηγή ἀλυκόν καὶ (K L P). The text interpreted above is supported by A B C. The Byzantine reading appears to be an attempt to smooth out difficulties by making v 12b repeat v 11. The text in κ is apparently an intermediate form. This commentary opts for the printed text because it is grammatically more difficult and yet fits the parallel in v 12a better and thus carries the thought on toward 3:13–18 (cf. Metzger, 682). James has moved from the impossibility of one nature producing two results to the observation that one's works reveal his true inspiration.”

[Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 148-49.]