

Introduction

One of the more challenging passages of the New Testament is James 2:14-26, which at first glance can seem to suggest a salvation based on faith plus works, in direct contrast to teachings of Paul and John elsewhere in scripture. This paper is an exegesis of that passage,¹ purporting to show that the message of James does not deviate from a “salvation by grace through faith” theology, nor does it counter Pauline or Johannine theology. Unless otherwise noted, all observations and conclusions are from my own study of the scriptures. Generally, I have not noted agreement I have found in subsequent reading, unless it bolstered my case significantly.

Background

An exegesis must take into account certain background issues, such as the author, original audience, historical situation, and any cultural or geographic concerns.

Author and Original Audience

The author identified himself as “James, a slave² of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” [1:1 NLT]. The assumption herein is that the author is James, the brother of Jesus, who became the leader of the Jerusalem church [Acts 15:13ff].³ Believing the text to be accurate, this is the only James [of whom we know] who could have been both so familiar and authoritative to his audience.⁴ Contemporaries considered James to represent conservative, Jewish, Christianity.⁵

The letter is addressed to “the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad” [1:1 NASB]. The NLT interprets as it translates: “Jewish Christians scattered among the nations.” While it is not conclusive, the reference to Abraham as “our father” does suggest the original readers were Jewish in heritage [2:21]. Though the term “brethren” can refer to those of like race, here it probably means those of like faith, thus indicating that James considered the original readers to be believers [1:2];⁶ perhaps James was making a play on words, since his readers were also of like race. The Christianity of the original readers is also indicated by the approach James took in his letter, not being apologetic, but rather convicting. The lack of elaboration in v.1:1 suggests

¹ I did this exegesis from the English text, though I used tools that analyzed the Greek. At the time I did this analysis, I had not studied Greek.

² The Greek word here is “δοῦλος,” often translated as “servant” [NIV] or “bond-servant” [NASB], but “slave” gives more of the shocking and radical meaning the apostles would have meant to characterize their sold-out attitudes based on the teachings of Christ [see, for example, Luke 9:23-24; 14:25-33].

³ One could write a similar length paper just on the authorship of almost any biblical book. I will not elaborate herein on all the arguments for and against each suggested author.

⁴ Guthrie wrote, “...it is evident that a well-known James must have been intended, and as far as the biblical record is concerned, the Lord’s brother is the only James who appears to have played a sufficiently prominent part in early Christian history.” See Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, Rev. Ed.. [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990], 726-727. This sentiment was echoed by Davids. See Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982], 6.

⁵ Robert W. Wall, “James, Letter of,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, eds. Ralph P. Martin & Peter H. Davids [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997], 555.

⁶ The Greek word here is “αδελφοί,” the plural of αδελφός. The definitions here and throughout this essay [unless otherwise noted] are from *The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon*, accessed at <http://bible.crosswalk.com/Lexicons/NewTestamentGreek/>.

James knew and was well known to his audience.⁷ The original readers were experiencing trials as evidenced by the immediate addressing of that issue in general [1:2], and the mention of specific issues that could be considered trials throughout the letter.

Historical Situation

The reference to a dispersion [1:1] and trials [1:2] suggests James wrote this letter to the people from the Jerusalem church who had fled Jerusalem in response to persecution [Acts 8:1]. Such a use of the term translated “dispersed” can refer to believers living even as close as other parts of Palestine but cut off from their usual society, as attested by contemporary Jewish literature.⁸ This dispersion happened soon after the crucifixion of Jesus, suggesting an early date. Since the letter does not mention the Jerusalem Council, it likely dates to before AD 49.⁹ This most likely would make it the first written of the epistles that became part of the New Testament.¹⁰ Further support for an early date is that the believers James addressed were still meeting in synagogues [2:2],¹¹ and that they were oppressed by wealthy landowners, a class which ceased to exist in much of Palestine after the siege of Jerusalem [ending in AD 70].¹²

James believed his friends were in danger of forgoing the wisdom of God to be influenced by the flesh [1:14; 3:14-15; 4:2-3], the world [1:27; 3:14-15; 4:4], and our spiritual enemy [3:14-15; 4:7]. James was concerned that these influences would lead to a theology comprised of deception about God [1:13], deception about salvific and transformational faith [1:27; 2:14-26], and self indulgence with regard to sin [4:2-3]. The original readers were struggling under trials [1:2], which was weakening their resolve against temptation [1:13-15]; they were not acting on the Word or living up to their beliefs [1:22-25]; they were experiencing conflicts among themselves because of wrong attitudes [1:20; 2:1-9; 3:14-15; 4:1-4; 5:1-6]; they were seeking pleasure instead of building kingdom treasure [1:10-11; 5:1-8].

It seems likely that there were people among the original readers who were strutting Pharisaic attitudes of wealth being a sign of blessing [1:10-11; 2:1-9; 5:1-6], scriptural knowledge being a sign of authority [1:22-25; 3:1], and the unimportance of spiritual transformation or adhering to

⁷ D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd Ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005], 621.

⁸ Wall, 548; the Greek word is διασπορά.

⁹ J. Ronald Blue, “James,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds. [Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2004], 816. The date of the council was confirmed by Paul Barnett, *Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times* [Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1999], 20. Constable believed this argument was tenuous, because the topic of the epistle is so much different from that of the council. See Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on James*, 2007 ed. [Accessed on 07.12.07 at <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/james.pdf>], 1. Blue, 816, also mentioned that, according to Flavius Josephus, James was martyred in AD 62.

¹⁰ As Guthrie, 739-740, noted, some literary critics have tried to prove a late date by arguing for allusion to writings of Paul or dependence on 1 Peter. It is worthy of noting that these apostles all knew each other and had shared ideas. Peter and James especially had worked long together in the Jerusalem church, and could be thought to be theologically in agreement [and that even before considering their common source: the Holy Spirit!].

¹¹ Virgil Porter, “The Sermon on the Mount in the Book of James, Part 1,” in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162, #647 [July – September 2005], 345; Guthrie, 748.

¹² Guthrie, 732, 750.

the spirit of God's revelation [1:13-15, 22-27; 2:14-26; 3:9-4:4]. James incorporated these issues – especially the last – into the context of his arguments.

Cultural and Geographic Concerns

The attitude of the writing makes it clear that James was addressing real life issues he believed were important for his audience. With this audience scattered over a wide area – we know the persecution in Jerusalem led to spread of the gospel in Judea and Samaria [Acts 8:1], and beyond to Damascus [Acts 9:1, 10, 19] and Phoenicia, Cypress, and Antioch [Acts 11:19] – James was forced to write about general themes he knew to be widely prevalent among them. Most likely, James wrote from Jerusalem, since we have no biblical record of him leaving the city after assuming precedence in the church there.

Literary Genre and Context

An exegesis must take into account certain literary issues, including genre considerations and the context of the passage within the letter.

Genre Considerations

The author wrote an exhortation¹³ to his friends to live up to what they believed. The exhortation has a salutation like a letter, though it lacks any closing and reads like an essay or sermon. Unlike Paul's letters – which tend to follow the pattern of personal information, theological argument, application of the theology, and then more personal information – James wrote a concise and powerful exhortation, in which theological argument was intermixed with application throughout. In some places, the theology is only implied or partially explained, because James was assuming the knowledge and faith of his readers. Several genre have been suggested for James, including diatribe, parenesis, wisdom, and homily,¹⁴ but James does not seem to fit any of them well. James not only combined discussion of theology with application, he also moved fluidly between subjects, defying any kind of linear structure. There is no fault in this, if it served James' purpose well.¹⁵

Context Within the Letter

The theme of the letter is that believers should live up to what they believe. There are two aspects to this: living up to what we think is right; and living out our faith [hope, confidence] in Christ. James drew his theology from God's previous revelation in scripture [there are numerous Old Testament references¹⁶], the revelation of the words of Christ [there are at least twenty allusions to the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount alone¹⁷], and "wisdom" [revelation] that can be sought in prayer [1:5; which would be delivered by the Holy Spirit, making this a fully triune theology]. Using these sources, James instructed on a theology consisting of the

¹³ I mean this in the typical English language sense of the word, not as a category of Greek form.

¹⁴ As discussed by Carson and Moo, 630.

¹⁵ Carson and Moo, 620.

¹⁶ These include an obvious reference to Genesis 15:6 in our subject passage. Blue, 817, said James made allusions to passages in twenty-one Old Testament books. Constable, 2, said twenty.

¹⁷ Going verse by verse through James, Porter, Part 1, 344, listed forty-five parallels to the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, but some of them were thematically redundant.

following: the wisdom of God's revelation compared to the temptation of the flesh, world, and spiritual enemy [1:13-18, 27; 3:13-18]; liberty through God's law [as mediated by Christ], instead of through self-indulgence [1:25; 2:12]; and the idea that true faith in Christ will manifest itself in sufficient transformation such that there is evidence of this faith in the believer's life, specifically through good works, obedience, and pure speech [1:26-27; 2:14-26; 3:13-18]. Acting in faith on God's wisdom will bring about acts of righteousness.

Based on this theology, James exhorted his friends to do the following: endure the trials of life in faith [1:2-4, 12; 5:7-8, 10-11]; resist temptation [1:13-15, 21, 26-27]; humbly submit to God [4:5-10, 13-17; 5:13]; live out what they believed was right [1:22-27; 2:14-26; 3:13-18; 4:17; 5:12], and love everyone without favoritism, conflict, or judgment [1:19-21; 2:1-13; 3:9-12; 4:1-4, 11-12; 5:9]. In the climax of his letter, James brought a solution to all these issues of struggling in the world, struggling against temptation, and living up to what one believes: he exhorted his readers to depend on God through confession and prayer, and to do this in the context of the Christian fellowship, confessing to each other [with hints at accountability] and praying for each other [with hints at encouragement], for it is only in this dependence on the living God and the body of Christ that anyone can live a successful Christian life [5:13-20].¹⁸

The letter has three broad sections¹⁹ as follows:

- I. Living in faith and love [1:1-2:13]
 - A. Enduring in faith and obedience [1:1-1:27]
 - B. Obeying the Law of Love [2:1-2:13]

- II. Showing our faith through our works and words [2:14-4:4]
 - A. Proving faith in Christ with works [2:14-2:26]
 - B. Proving wisdom from God with words [3:1-4:4]

- III. Living in humble dependence [4:5-5:20]
 - A. Having an attitude of humility [4:5-5:6]
 - B. Reiteration of high points [5:7-5:12]
 - C. Dependence on God and community, in prayer, confession, and fellowship [5:13-20].

The passage in question thus falls into the second section, about showing our faith in action.²⁰ Broadly speaking, the whole letter is about the need and the failure of the original readers to prove their faith through their actions.

¹⁸ There is much to be said for other aspects of the sanctification process [e.g. being Spirit led] and it is said elsewhere in the New Testament, but James leaves it implied [submission and prayer would result in Spirit filling and thus Spirit leading, e.g.].

¹⁹ Blue, 818-819, going by chapters, had a nice topical outline which broke the message as follows: Confident Stand; Compassionate Service; Careful Speech; Contrite Submission; and Concerned Sharing. Wall, 552, interestingly broke the body of the book into categories that relate back to 1:19-20: Be quick to hear [1:22-2:26]; Be slow to speak [3:1-18]; Be slow to anger [4:1-5:6]. Though he does not use them as section headings, in class Loken mentioned key attitudes the reader should have for each section of the book. Israel Loken, "James Notes," unpublished class notes augmented by class discussion.

Observation

Exegesis requires careful observation of the passage, including consideration of key words and organization of the passage.

Key Words

The Greek word translated as “faith” in this passage is almost always translated such for this passage and throughout the Bible, though it can mean general belief.²¹ It is the word translated as “faith” in Paul’s definitive salvation passages in Romans. Within this passage he also uses another Greek word which is translated as the verb “believe” [2:19], when discussing a specific belief in God as one, which is the same verb for “believe” used by Paul in Romans.²² The Greek word translated as “justified” in this passage by almost all modern translations can also mean vindicated or freed.²³

The Greek word translated as “works” in this passage is the standard word meaning any kind of deed or accomplishment.²⁴ It is variously translated as “actions” or “deeds” without any change in meaning. It is the word translated as “works” in Romans 3:28; 4:2; 11:6. The Greek word translated as “saved” in this passage by almost all modern translations almost always is translated as “saved,” though it sometimes is translated as “cured” or “made well.”²⁵ It is the word translated as “saved” in Romans 5:9; 10:9; 10:13.²⁶ The Greek word translated as “dead”

²⁰ Loken, 2, considered the subject passage in the context of chapter two overall, which he entitled “Instruction Concerning the Rich and the Poor.” I agree that the two halves of chapter two are linked thematically, but I would argue that vv.14-26 are the broader thematic element, perhaps triggered in James’ mind by the discussion in vv.1-13, but more important because of being the theological explanation of the earlier verses. I would say vv.1-13 exemplify the reason for and application of the argument in vv.14-26.

²¹ The Greek word is [variations of] the lexical entry πιστις. Unless otherwise noted, primary translation will be from the NASB throughout. For this passage, I verified translation from NASB, ESV, NIV, NKJV, HCSB, NLT, NRS, and NET, which will be standard practice throughout this section of the essay unless otherwise noted. For translation elsewhere in the Bible, I am relying throughout this essay on two sources: *The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon* and the lexicon that comes up when one clicks on a Strong’s entry number in the Greek text at Bible.org, accessed at <http://net.bible.org/bible.php?book=Jam&chapter=2&tab=grkheb>.

²² The Greek word is [variations of] the lexical entry πιστεύω.

²³ The Greek word is [variations of] the lexical entry δικαιόω. The exceptions in the translation of this passage are that the NIV translated it as “considered righteous” in v.21 and “justified” in v.24; and the NLT translated it as “declared right” and “made right” in the two verses respectively. Martin translated it as “proved righteous.” See Ralph P. Martin, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary [Nashville, TN: Nelson Reference and Electronic, 1988], 76.

²⁴ The Greek word is [variations of] the lexical entry ἔργον.

²⁵ The Greek word is [variations of] the lexical entry σώζω. It is translated as “restore” in 5:15. Fanning analyzed the theory that James was using this word in the subject passage to refer to temporarily avoiding physical death, but he dispelled the likelihood of that by tracing usage throughout the letter and comparing it to similar passages in the speech of Jesus, whom we know James emulated. See Buist M. Fanning, “A Theology of James,” in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, Roy B. Zuck, ed. [Chicago: Moody Press, 1994], 423-425.

²⁶ Moo argued that a perspective of salvation as future [eschatological] for the believer is customary in the New Testament, referring to “the believer’s ultimate deliverance from sin and death that takes place at the time of Christ’s return in glory...” He said James’ use of the term was also future oriented. See Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company,

in this passage by almost all modern translations is the standard Greek word for “dead” and is used throughout the New Testament in this fashion.²⁷ The Greek word translated as “perfected” in this passage is sometimes translated such by the modern translations, and sometimes with a sense of completion instead, though doubtless the meaning is the same.²⁸ This word is sometimes used with reference to spiritual maturity, a theme brought up in v.1:4 with the believer becoming “perfect” and “complete.”²⁹

Organization of the Passage

James 2:14-26

14	Faith that does not result in works is not saving faith.	Introduction
15-16	If you wish someone well but do not meet his need, it is not helpful.	Saving Faith Results in Works
17	Similarly, faith without works is dead.	
18	Someone might contend that faith and works are separate, but we prove our faith by our works. ³⁰	
19	Intellectual acknowledgement is insufficient, for even the demons have that. ³¹	
20	We should recognize that faith without works is useless.	
21	Abraham was "justified" by works when he offered up Isaac on the alter.	OT Examples Prove This
22	His faith was working with his works, and by his works his faith was perfected.	
23	Thus the scripture was fulfilled that Abraham believed God and thus was considered righteous [quotes Gen.15:6]; also, Abraham thus was called God's friend [alluding to 2 Chronicles 20:7 or Isaiah 41:8].	
24	Thus we see that man is justified by works [and faith], not faith alone.	
25	Similarly, Rahab was justified by works [and faith] when she helped God's people.	Conclusion
26	As the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works.	

The passage is not complicated in organization: it is an argument with a loose inclusio framing it. James stated that faith without works could not be saving faith, proceeded to show that such faith would be useless [cf. the useless religion in 1:26-27], argued that faith is proven by its resultant works, offered two historical and biblical examples, and concluded that faith without works was as dead as a body without a spirit. The passage seems to have two main sections within the

2000], 88. This is despite Paul's usage of the word in his insistence on immediate salvation in these Romans passages and elsewhere, as Moo noted, 133.

²⁷ The Greek word is [variations of] the lexical entry νεκρός.

²⁸ The Greek word is [variations of] the lexical entry τελειόω. NIV, LNT, ESV, and NRS use a sense of completion, while NASB, NKJV, HCSB, and NET use a sense of perfection.

²⁹ The Greek words are τέλειος and ὅλοκληρος.

³⁰ I believe there should be no quotation marks in this passage. James stated that someone might contend that his readers have faith [without works] and James has works [though also faith], the idea being that the concepts can be separated. James finished the verse with the challenge for the readers to show their faith somehow without any works and he would show his faith by his works. The only problem with this analysis is that the word for “you” [the Greek σὺ] is singular. Davids, 123, argued the references to individuals here was irrelevant, the point being that “the interlocutor is claiming that faith and works may exist separately...”

³¹ Davids, 128-129, believed this reference to “God is one” introduced the Abrahamic line of thought, since Abraham was “known as a man who had turned from idols to serve the one God...” Furthermore, as such, it also introduced Abraham's faith, which was later brought up in v.22.

inclusio, with v.20 forming an inclusio for each section if used with the introduction and conclusion respectively. The first section then states that saving faith results in works, while the second section offers up Old Testament examples.

Interpretation

It is important to note that this passage begins not with the idea that one *has* faith but not works, but that one *says* he has faith but *has* no works [v.14]. Based on the key word analysis earlier, it is clear that James was asserting at the start of his argument that saving faith will result in good deeds, and the “faith” claimed by this supposed person would not really be faith at all.^{32 33} He specified examples of such good deeds throughout the letter, but one need look no farther for an example than the next two lines [which tie this passage to the one immediately preceding it]: to provide for people’s needs [vv.15-16].³⁴ Without good deeds, this supposed faith would be useless to others in need.

In v.17, James asserted that, just as wishing someone well but not providing for them is useless, so too is “faith” dead if without works. Language affects the way we think, both procedurally and symbolically. For an English speaking fellow, this sentence would make more sense if the word for “faith” had been translated as “belief,” for then James would be saying intellectual assent is insufficient [cf. v.19] and true faith will prove itself by actions [cf. v.18].³⁵ However,

³² Moo, 123. Porter noted that Jesus taught that good fruit was the result of those connected to him [Matthew 5:17-20; 7:16-23]. See Virgil Porter, “The Sermon on the Mount in the Book of James, Part 2,” in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162, #648 [October – December 2005], 481. He was quoting Toussaint, who said, “James speaks of good works as being the natural evidence of a genuine faith (James 2:18). Jesus shows that good fruit is the result of a true repentance (Matthew 5:17-20; 7:16-23). Being and doing are inseparable.” See Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* [Grand Rapids, MI: Kregal Academic & Professional, 1980], 94. Matthew 21:28-32 is a parable worth meditation, as Jesus pointed out the vacuous declaration of faith of the religious leaders compared to the significance of the wanton sinners coming to him in faith.

³³ Constable, 30-31, tied this passage back to 1:21-22 [as I do later in this essay], and said the point was that such faith cannot save from God’s discipline, from the deadly consequences of sin in this life [from loss of intimacy with God to physical death]. He then saw vv.15-16 as an illustration that faith alone cannot preserve life any better than a benediction alone can preserve life. For v.17, he thought the term “dead” tied into this preserving life theme, and referred to the faith being non-vital, not non-existent. As mentioned in an earlier footnote, Fanning, 423-425, dispelled the likelihood of such usage. Loken, 2-3, saw the whole letter as being about sanctification, as indicated by the immediate reference to spiritual maturity in 1:2-4. Thus, he saw “save” as saving one from the believer’s eschatological judgment, and the contrast being between the hearer who has faith only and the doer who has faith and works and so gets mercy. This is a possible interpretation, but I do not think it does justice to vv.18-19, which seem to be showing the non-salvific nature of intellectual assent alone. Loken, 3, said these verses explained that people of faith who have no works should shudder because they will face judgment even if they go to Heaven. I am aware that several scholars come closer to the views of Loken or Constable than to my own.

³⁴ Porter, Part 1, 350, had vv.14-16 as a parallel to Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 7:21-23, but Jesus seemed to be discussing people who had works without saving faith, not people who contended they had faith but showed no works. If we looked at 7:21 alone, we might see a parallel, but 7:22-23 make it impossible.

³⁵ Speaking of this passage, Wall, 558, summarized nicely: “...true religion is an ethical religion, not confessional orthodoxy...” However, I believe he erred in considering the Torah to be the “law” to which James referred in this book. While James used Old Testament teachings to make his points, at least up to the passage in question his references to “law” have referred specifically to the command to love one another. Fanning, 431, argued that this came from Leviticus 19:18, and interpreted “royal” to refer to the Kingdom law, which he said “includes the commands of the Old Testament (the Decalogue as well as Leviticus 19)...” Later on the same page, he said James meant “the Old Testament ethic as taught and fulfilled by Jesus Christ. It is the Old Testament read in the light of

even as “faith” we can make sense of this sentence by considering James to be using irony.³⁶ The passage began with someone suggesting a person could have faith but be showing no works, and so James ironically refers to that inadequate “faith” here as being dead.³⁷

James continued in irony, challenging his readers to show their faith if they were not doing good deeds, for he would show evidence of his faith by the good deeds he was doing [v.18].³⁸ He went on to illustrate that intellectual assent to God’s existence was insufficient for salvation, for even the demons [for whom there is no salvation] have such knowledge [v.19].³⁹ James completed this first segment of the passage with a reiteration that “faith” that does not result in good deeds is useless, this time for the one who professes to have it [v.20].⁴⁰ James’ contention is that true salvific faith will lead to obedience, so his readers – whom he addressed as believers – must not be abiding⁴¹ in their faith if they are not experiencing obedience.^{42 43} This ties back

Jesus’ teaching and culminated by the salvation He provided.” This is not a paper on the applicability of the Mosaic Covenant Law to the modern believer, so I will simply say I disagree because I do not think this is what Jesus meant to pass on to us with his command. As Davids, 47, noted, James made zero mention of the ceremonial law.

³⁶ Davids, 50, viewed this usage of the Greek term “πίστις” as different than elsewhere in James and the Bible, but I think it is the normal usage but with an ironic voice. James did not view this as genuine πίστις at all. See also Moo, 126.

³⁷ Loken, 2, viewed “dead” as referring to sinful. Moo, 126, mentioned Jesus discussing people serving him by meeting the needs of others, in Matthew 25:42-43.

³⁸ Constable, 32-33, said that v.18 was a third-party objection to the idea that works always evidence faith, and thus the demons are a counter example by James of a situation where belief is right but works are not right, and thus these verses have nothing to do with a state of being lost. I cannot see the sense in this. I appreciate Constable’s concern to voice correct theology about the sanctification process and the existence of carnal Christians, but I think we can accomplish that with my interpretation, which has certain advantages in that it does not put into the objector’s voice the very argument James seemed to be making, it does not force James to change direction and now argue something different from what he had been, and it does not suggest that demons have “faith” as we know the term.

³⁹ Davids, 125, argued for such an effective interpretation, noting James had the other person putting his faith in a creed, not “the distinctively Christian personal trust and commitment which would include obedience...”

⁴⁰ Though I do not consider it a “key word,” it is interesting to note what Blue, 826, said about the word translated as “foolish” in v.20: he noted that the Greek term, κενός, is usually translated “vain” or “empty.” This brought to mind the wisdom literature “fool” who has rejected – or is empty of – God’s wisdom. Martin, 90, mentioned this fool, but as having rejected God. Moo, 132, mentioned him as well, though he thought there was a greater moral implication in the Greek term than in the Hebrew one, connoting more of a “hard-hearted ignorance.” On the same page, Moo made a different observation about the language in this verse, noting that what the end literally says, in a play on words, is something like, “faith that does not work does not work.”

⁴¹ Fanning, 423, noted, “As James 1:18 and 21 point out, Christians have been born of God through His Word and that Word is now planted within them to oppose the evil inclination. There is a life transforming power in God’s wisdom as found in His Word and this can overcome the evil impulse and produce the harvest of righteous fruit God desires.”

⁴² Carson and Moo, 633, eloquently said, “He resolutely opposes the tendency all too common among Christians to rest content with a halfhearted, compromising faith that seeks to have the best of both this world and the next.” Davids, 50, said, “The argument is that verbal, intellectual assent to doctrine is meaningless unless an altered lifestyle reveals a truly salvific commitment.” Martin, 79, said James “is intent on defining the scope of saving faith, which he sets in direct contrast to (i) mere sentiment that never gets beyond a pious expression (v 16 [sic]), and (ii) an intellectual conviction (voiced in v 19 [sic]), which he dismisses scornfully...”

to 1:18-22, in that the believer is changed by having the Word implanted in him such that he grows to desire to apply what he learns from the Word of God.⁴⁴

If the passage ended here, there would not be much controversy about it. However, James went on to give two illustrations of his point, primarily one about Abraham. James argued that Abraham was “justified” by works when he offered up Isaac for a sacrifice [v.21]. It would be easier to consider this “vindicated” in English,⁴⁵ as in Abraham had proved his faith [cf. v.22]. However, even if that were the translation, it would still leave us with the same Greek word as used by Paul to mean “justified.”⁴⁶ Fortunately, as indicated, we can look to the following verse for understanding: as a result of Abraham’s actions, his faith was “perfected” [v.22]. Whether translated with a sense of perfection or completion,⁴⁷ the point is that when faith is genuine it effects good deeds through the person holding it.

This is made even clearer by the following verse, that it was Abraham’s believing, his faith, that brought the declaration of imputed righteousness from God [v.23]. The point being that Abraham believed God enough to act on that belief: his true faith resulted in right actions.⁴⁸ James continued with a reiteration of his opening statement about this illustration, that our righteousness or “justification” comes from faith that is genuine enough to generate right actions [v.24].⁴⁹ In a bit of overkill, he made reference to a second historical illustration, that of Rahab

⁴³ Speaking about the context of the subject passage, Martin, 80, said, “Those who are depicted in 2:1-13 as guilty of discrimination against the poor demonstrate that they do not have the faith required for eschatological salvation.” Unless Martin means salvation from a believer’s judgment, I disagree with this: while James was discussing salvific faith in 2:14-26, he was not saying a lack of works revealed a lack of salvation, but that his believing friends were not abiding in that faith as they must have been to become saved. Perhaps I misunderstood what Martin said, for later, 82, he said James was discussing “the case of the professing Christian who has fallen into wrong-headed ways and needs the reminder that genuine faith must issue in ‘good works,’ which are not salvific but evidential...” Later still, 83, he said that to James works had a part to play in the process of full salvation, separating the idea of current salvation and eschatological salvation, but perhaps merging the processes of salvation and sanctification.

⁴⁴ Moo, 88. Moo, 120, tied the faith that works back to the true religion of 1:21, and considered the discussion here about a faith / works “antithesis” to tie back to the hearing of the word / doing the word “antithesis” of 1:22.

⁴⁵ Moo, 135, discussed this possibility.

⁴⁶ Davids, 51, thought James’ use of δικαιόω to be similar to that in the Septuagint, meaning “show to be righteous,” as opposed to “declare to be righteous.” Martin, 91, saw such a demonstrative essence as well, and also brought up that James “uses the term to denote God’s eschatological pronouncement on one who is shown to be righteous...” This is unnecessary complication to James’ argument. The word can have its usual meaning here, but how it is used will show us what James is saying. Constable, 34, said the term “always means to *declare* someone righteous, not to make someone righteous...” [italics in original]. Thus, Abraham was declared righteous in Genesis 15:6 when he came to faith, and again twenty years later when he was obviously obedient; this was a second declaration, not a second or subsidiary earning of righteousness. The problem with this logic is that it seems to contradict Paul’s usage of the term in Romans.

⁴⁷ Constable, 34, said this meant the faith was made stronger. Moo, 137, said Abraham’s faith “reached its intended goal when the patriarch did what God was asking him to do.”

⁴⁸ Moo, 137, said, “Abraham’s faith is specifically his complete trust in God with reference to the Lord’s promise that he would have a natural descendent...”

⁴⁹ Davids, 132, said, “The point James is making is that it is from one’s works (ἐξ ἔργων) that God declares one righteous in the final judgment... no question of the forensic justification of sinners arises, but rather of what pleases God.” I like my interpretation better, because it relies on the more frequent meaning of justification. However, I do

[v.25], perhaps to show that the theology worked for anyone from the most esteemed to the lowest [Rahab being a Gentile prostitute].⁵⁰ James closed this passage with a reiteration that faith which does not generate good deeds is dead, just as is a body without a spirit [v.26].⁵¹

The point of the passage then is that true salvific faith is the kind that results in acts of obedience. It is important to note that “good deeds” are results of true faith, not prerequisites.⁵² Also, James was not suggesting that everyone who lacked good deeds was necessarily not saved. He is asking his readers to consider the question, “If such faith is not salvific, what does it say about believers who exhibit a like faith?” The context of the argument is that James is trying to convince back-sliding believers that they are in sin.

Correlation

The big theological question about this passage is whether it counters the arguments of Paul and John that faith alone is the human requirement for salvation.⁵³ We can see from the above analysis that this is not so. Paul argued that works could not save [Romans 3:28], while James argued that works would result from being saved, which in itself is an argument with which Paul would agree.⁵⁴ Romans 6:22 and Galatians 2:20 specify the expectation of sanctification for the believer; elsewhere, Paul repeatedly called for righteous behavior by believers [e.g. Romans 6:13]. Ephesians 5:8 combines the expectation for real change from faith and the expectation that the result will be changed behavior. Furthermore, James had already made clear that salvation was a matter of God’s initiative, not human initiative [1:17-18].⁵⁵ As for the writings of John, 1 John 3:17-19 is practically a parallel to James 2:14-16; 1 John 2:5-6 discusses the need for believers to be obedient, be like Christ, and practice righteousness; and 1 John 3:23-24 and 1 John 4:15, 20 suggest that if we abide in God, we will love others.

However, there remains one issue to resolve, in the ways that Paul and James used the same illustration. Consider these two passages:⁵⁶

not deny that a believer will have to answer for his behavior, as Martin, 82, also pointed out. Constable, 35, believed that “fulfilled” in v.23 was saying the scripture was made abundantly clear.

⁵⁰ Martin, 97; Moo, 143. Constable, 36, said that Rahab is an example of a physical life saved because of works.

⁵¹ Moo, 144, said the point was that without the spirit to animate the body, it was dead; so too faith that is not accompanied by works “ceases to be.” It is a mere profession and has no claim to being genuine. Moo emphasized “James is not arguing that works be ‘added’ to faith, but that one possess the right kind of faith, a ‘faith that works.’”

⁵² As Fanning, 427-428, said, James viewed works “as the expression or outworking of true faith and of new life in Christ, not the means of gaining these blessings. They demonstrate faith (2:18), are the completion and fulfillment of faith (2:22-23), and constitute living out the Word that was already implanted by God when He gave spiritual birth to the Christian (1:18-21).”

⁵³ As Guthrie, 739, 753-754, noted, if the assumption is correct that James wrote prior to Paul, it is possible that Paul wrote to correct misconceptions about this teaching of James. He said this makes more sense than the idea that James wrote to correct misconceptions about the teachings of Paul, because this passage would not adequately explain Paul’s teaching.

⁵⁴ Martin, 81, said, “Paul denies the need for ‘pre-conversion works’ and James emphasizes the ‘absolute necessity of post-conversion works.’”

⁵⁵ Carson and Moo, 633, though they failed to give the verse reference.

⁵⁶ Moo, 140, has a startling comparison of James 2:24 with Romans 3:28, but the issue is the same as herein.

Romans 4:2-5: “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness...”

James 2:21-24: “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,’ and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

The reconciliation of these two passages is to again realize that James was saying that Abraham was justified by having faith enough to act: he believed God’s promise and so was willing to obey, and this is exactly what Paul is stressing: the belief in God’s promise.^{57 58}

In 1 Corinthians 3:1-4, Paul made it clear that there could be genuine believers who were living carnally, like those who did not believe. James is addressing such people, who genuinely accepted Christ in faith, but have reverted or never advanced beyond worldly behavior, and his contention is that true faith as they have would result in internal change that would result in

⁵⁷ Blue, 826, summarized well with the idea that Paul was speaking of the priority of faith while James was speaking of the proof of faith. Elsewhere, Blue, 816, maintained that James wrote about outward serving faith from man’s perspective and Paul wrote about inward saving faith from God’s perspective. The weakness in this is two-fold: first, while James showed obvious concern for serving as evidence of faith, his “works” or evidence was not limited to serving but included all obedience; second, there is no such thing as “serving faith,” and James’ point is that faith that saves will result in works. On the same page, Blue said something similar despite his terminology: “The true seed of saving faith is verified by the tangible fruit of serving faith. James’ point is that biblical faith works.” Carson and Moo, 633, said that James was talking about the demonstration of our righteousness, while Paul was talking about the declaration of our righteousness.

⁵⁸ Moo, 141, believed James referred to the ultimate verdict pronounced at the last judgment while Paul referred to the initial declaration of innocence before God. Moo, 133, argued that James actually made a critical change in the Jewish literary tradition toward the position of Paul, showing that faith was the ultimate cause of the works through which Abraham was justified. On the other hand, earlier, 39, he said that the contemporary Jewish scholarly theology was that “Judaism was a religion of grace” because God freely granted a covenant with his people, and they then obeyed the Law as a grateful response to God’s electing grace. This sounds promising to a New Testament scholar of today. Moo, 39-40, went on to say that “belonging to the covenant (in the sense of being born into the people of Israel) was not a guarantee of salvation. Jews viewed salvation as a decision made by God at the time of the judgment. God’s grace in the covenant provided the sufficient means for salvation; but the individual Jew still had to commit himself or herself to obey the law in order to be saved on the last day.” He termed this as “synergistic,” a sort of grace + works theology, and said James has elements of such synergism: the believer comes into new life by grace, but final salvation, deliverance in the judgment of God, “justification” takes into account one’s works. However, he finished, 42, with James having a “monergistic view of salvation in his emphasis on the creative power of the new birth in 1:18... Faith alone brings one into relationship with God in Christ – but true faith inevitably generates the works that God will take into account in his final decision about the fate of men and women.” One hopes Moo referred to the believer’s judgment and not that which involves the decision of Heaven or Hell.

behavioral changes, just as Paul or John would suggest. Therefore, James, like Paul to the Corinthians, addressed his readers to consider the error of their ways. He exhorted them to live up to what they believed.

Application

It is not really a part of exegesis to find modern day application, but this section can serve as a summary of the interpretation in a sense. There are two primary applications relevant to believers today: First, if one is not seeing evidence of his salvation by a change in the way he lives, it would be worthwhile to question whether he was truly saved; second, if assured of salvation, such a person should realize the sinfulness of the present lifestyle and the evident lack of sanctification it indicates, and take steps to correct the problem. For the church, there are similar realizations: that it is not enough for people to profess faith;⁵⁹ rather, we must encourage and teach them how to seek sanctification, teach them the expectations of God for believers, and provide them with opportunities to prove their faith by their works.

Conclusion

Though careful study of this passage has yielded many diverse interpretations among biblical scholars, almost all come to a similar conclusion, that the theology of James is in harmony with other New Testament writers, and that he is not advocating a works-based theology. Some would not agree, but they tend to be those hampered by doubt about the integrity of the scriptures or an ill-advised force-placement of their church's theology on the text. James exhorted is readers to live up to their faith, in this passage as well as in his whole letter.

⁵⁹ Davids, 134, said, "Dead orthodoxy has absolutely no power to save and may in fact even hinder the person from coming to living faith, a faith enlivened by works of charity..."