

# VOICES AND FACES: THE SIN OF CLASS DISTINCTION IN THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

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## ABSTRACT

The common belief that James did not have a well-established theological purpose when he wrote his epistle may have overshadowed the fact that his obsession for acoustic word-constructions has theological implications. An interesting case that attests to that possibility is James's use of the word *prosôpolêmptia* ("favoritism" or "class distinction") in 2:1. My suggestion is that James paid close attention to the subject of *prosôpolêmptia* or class distinction, and developed it by means of acoustic hints. By doing so, he attained the same level of tolerance to a harsh speech on the part of his audience as the moral philosophers of his time did when addressing difficult themes.

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James is a puzzling book in many respects. Firstly, the excellent Greek his author uses seems incompatible with the idea that he was a simple man from Palestine. Secondly, James shows an unexpected erudition that enables him to choose the diatribe, a Hellenistic literary form,<sup>2</sup> as the vehicle for his epistle, as well as to employ a relatively high number of figures of speech, and twice to make use of hexameters (in 1:17 and 4:5). As we all probably know, that was the poetic meter that immortalized Greek and Latin epic poetry.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the ostensible absence of a theological goal of which the author has been accused is at odds with the highly religious and spiritual nature of his epistle, which as we notice from the outset (1:1) is addressed to religious communities and not to academic think tanks.<sup>4</sup>

The interest that James – or his amanuensis – shows for figures of speech can be perceived, for instance, from the metaphors that he uses to describe human speech in 3:1-12. In only twelve verses, James offers us seven images representing human speech: an untamable stallion (v. 2-3), a ship in a storm (4), an uncontrollable fire (5-6), a world (or adornment) of iniquity (6),<sup>5</sup> an undomesticated beast (7-8), a spring of bittersweet water (11) and a tree bearing unpalatable fruit (12). In addition, James pays close attention to the sound of the words he uses, constantly resorting to alliterations, paronomasia, and echoes. These acoustic devices were – and still are – common in poetical language. Alliteration is the systematic repetition of consonant sounds in the same verse or group of verses, such as is the case of the repetition of the Greek consonant Pi, in three consecutive words in the beginning of the letter (1:2): *peirasmois* (“trials”), *peripesête* (“should fall”) and *poikilois* (“several”). Paronomasia, on the other hand, is the bringing together of similar words bearing different meanings in the same sentence or group of sentences, as is the case of a word sequence that appears in the beginning of the second chapter: *eiselthê* (“enters”, in v. 2), *esthêti* (“robe”, also in v. 2), *eiselthê* (“enters”, repeated in v. 2), *esthêti* (“robe”, repeated in v. 2), and *sthêti* (“stands”, in v. 3). Echo or rhyme is the systematic repetition of similar word endings used at the end of consecutive or alternate poetical lines. This happens, for instance, in 1:6 and 1:14 where the words *anemizomenôî* (“blown by the wind”) and *hipizomeôî* (“tossed”), and *exelkomenos* (“attracted”) and *deleazomenos* (“seduced”) occur.

A possible explanation why James worries so much about the acoustic image of his words is that, in Antiquity, reading out loud was a common practice. Thus, Phillip was able to hear what the eunuch from Acts 8:27-30 was reading. This evoking – in the writing

<sup>2</sup> This is a genre developed from Greek rhetoric. Initially employed by Bion, the diatribe was also used by Socrates, the sophists, and especially by the Cynics and Stoics.

<sup>3</sup> We do not know, however, whether James only quoted these verses, possibly borrowing them from Greek works, or whether either he or his amanuensis wrote them.

<sup>4</sup> Luther was the first one to complain about the theological sterility of James’s epistle.

<sup>5</sup> The word *kosmos* is ambiguous and can mean either “world” or “adornment”. In my opinion, James meant “adornment” since throughout his discussion of the seven metaphors for human speech he tends to show how a small thing can control, spoil or destroy a big thing. In this case, a bad choice in regards to an adornment item can spoil the whole attire.

process – of special sound effects to be reproduced at the moment when letters and other pieces of literature were to be read aloud was not uncommon. We know that Greek and Latin epic poetry was composed as part of a long-standing oral tradition that presupposed public recitals. During these performances, a rhapsode, as the reciting artist was called, strove to obtain the best sound effects that were available in order to please his audience. Besides depending on his memory in order to maintain the narrative flowing, he would often improvise, always relying on acoustic formulas drawn from a corpus available to the bards. The need for public reading and the desire to acoustically impress his audience probably motivated James's interest for word sounds. On the other hand, acoustic devices may have been used for mnemonic reasons. At a time when writing tools and skills were in short supply, great effort was put into memorizing texts for public recitation. The acoustic sequences carefully created by James betray his desire that his work should be learnt by heart. This concern was not uncommon in Antiquity either. We know, for instance, that Lucretius wrote his master work in hexameters because he wanted his disciples to memorize most of what Epicurus had ever taught concerning astronomy, physics, chemistry, philosophy, and religion (Cicero, *De fin.* 2.7).

James's mnemonic concern also explains another interesting but still unexplored aspect of his style. This author has a penchant for using one word – or its acoustic image – repeat it, and then discard it. This happens, for instance, with quite a few words in chapter one: *hypomonê* (“patience”), used in v. 3, repeated in v. 4 and, then, discarded; *leipomenoi* (“lacking”), used in v. 4, repeated in v. 5 as *leipetai* (“lacks”) and, then, discarded; *aiteitô* (“let him ask”), used in v. 5, repeated in v. 6 and, then, discarded; *tapeinos* (“humble”), used in v. 9, repeated in v. 10 as *tapeinôsei* (“humbleness” or “humiliation”) and, then, discarded; *pousios* (“rich”), used in v. 10, repeated in v. 11 and, then, discarded; *anthos* (“flower”) and *chortos* (“grass”), used in v. 10, repeated in v. 11 and, then, discarded. This does not mean that such words cannot be reutilized later in his exposition, but they are not retrieved in the same context. Such a systematic word-linking process cannot have happened randomly. I believe that James used it in order to make memorization less work-demanding.

The common belief that James did not have a well-established theological purpose when he wrote his epistle may have overshadowed the fact that his obsession for acoustic word-constructions has theological implications. An interesting case that attests to that possibility is James's use of the word *prosôpolêmepsia* (“favoritism” or “class distinction”) in 2:1. James worried about how church people behaved regarding social status. He unremittingly deals with the tension between being rich and being Christian. He introduces this theme in 1:9-11, when he compares a rich person to a wild flower that soon withers, and then resumes it in more detail in 2:1-13. This problem is in fact part of a greater tension which he sees to exist between faith and works, one of his epistle's major themes.

My suggestion is that the subject of *prosôpolêmptia* or class distinction bothered James so much that he paid close attention to it as we can see from his acoustic hints throughout chapter 1. He makes continuous reference to it until he is able to deal with it in a more thorough way in chapter 2. This method of superficially referring to a specific problem, postponing its full treatment to a more suitable opportunity ahead in the text was successfully employed by the Epicurean philosophers, especially Lucretius and Diogenes of Oinoanda. Lucretius magnificently compares this technique of Epicurean psychogogy to the attempt to minister ill-tasting medicine to a child by an experienced physician (*De rerum natura* 1.936-950; 4.1-25). James attenuates the severity of his reproof by resorting to acoustic disguises whereas – at the same time – he allows his audience to follow his argument without any early and undue prejudice. The very genre he chose for his composition – the diatribe – aids his undertaking. In ancient times, those philosophers who used the diatribe did not openly rebuke their audiences. It was common for them to imagine a supposed interlocutor in order to direct the weight of the reprimand away from their audiences, thus making them more inclined to accepting the scolding and longing for betterment. James does that admirably well. He chooses to use the third person imperative rather than the second person, thus avoiding confronting his audience: “if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt” (1:5-6a); “that man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord” (1:7); “the brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position” (1:9); “when tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me’.” (1:13), and so on.

By concealing his discussion of class distinction under acoustic disguises he probably succeeded in avoiding indisposing his audience against this theme. James addresses a real problem but he does so wisely. He gradually opens the eyes of his church members until they get a full glimpse of the problem. Paul helps us – in Galatians 2:6 – to visualize how James was able to address the problem of class distinction while dealing with other important spiritual matters. When the apostle referred to those who continuously aggravated him with Judaizing requirements, he said that God paid no attention to appearances: “as for those who seemed to be important – whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance – those men added nothing to my message”. The statement “God does not judge by external appearance” is a good translation for *prosôpon ho theos anthrôpou ou lambanei* that means literally “God does not receive a man’s face”. The two word stems for the expression *prosôpolêmptia* (“class distinction”) occur in this verse: face (*prosôpos*) and receive (*lambanei*). Even if we make no effort to etymologize, we are entitled to say that *prosôpolêmptia* means “to receive one’s face”. That is, class distinction or favoritism is a sin that leads a person to pay way too much attention to external appearance. James says in 1:7 that a man who doubts “should not think he will receive (*lêmptsetai*) anything

from the Lord". The future form of the verb makes it easier for us to see the etymological connection to the word we are now discussing.

A second-century text provides additional confirmation that the expression *prosōpon lambanō* meant favoritism. *Didachē* 4:3 reads: *krineis dikaiōs, ou lēpsēi prosōpon elegxai epi paraptōmasin*, "you shall judge fairly, you shall not receive the face [show favoritism] when you rebuke them for their transgressions". In 5:2, this ancient text scolds those who, in the environment of early Christianity, used their social positions in order to exploit the have-nots, dubbing them "murderers of children" (*phoneis teknōn*), "destroyers of the handiwork of God" (*phthoreis plasmatos Theou*), "advocates of the rich" (*plousiōn paraklētoi*), "lawless judges of the poor" (*penētōn anomoi kritai*) and "utter sinners" (*panthamartētoi*). In fact, in this we notice clear echoes from the reprimand James directs against similar people in his epistle.

James systematically uses the verb "to receive" – especially its future form that best connects it to *prosōpolēmpsia* – in order to show that the sincere Christian should strive to receive *something* rather than *someone*. That is, Christians should treat all people well because we desire to receive spiritual and eschatological rewards rather than earthly benefits. It is in 1:7 that James uses the verb "to receive" for the first time. According to him, the man who doubts does not have either works or faith. That is why he is easily blown and tossed by the winds of trials. "That man" (*ho anthrōpos ekeinos*) stands in contrast to the "blessed man" (*makarios anēr*) in 1:12 "who perseveres under trials" and "will receive (*lēmpsetai*) the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him." According to James, faith without works is dead. According to him, there is a clear distinction between the man who doubts and yields to temptation – having no faith or works – and the man who believes and perseveres under trials – having both faith and works. It is in fact the lack of faith and works that will cause men to stand before God having nothing to receive from him apart from judgment. According to James 3:1, "only a few of you, my brothers, should be teachers, bearing in mind that we shall receive (*lēmpsometha*) a stricter judgment." In this context there is a noticeable contrast between receiving a spiritual reward and receiving a strict trial sentence.

James insists on comparing the rich man to a withering flower (1:10-11). The rewards from class distinction and favoritism are short-lived and earthly while the rewards from faithfulness to God are permanent and celestial (1:12). That is why James talks about the exaltation and dignity of the humble man (1:9), or his wealth in faith (2:5). A simple man who obeys God should be the one to receive special distinction. When we receive him well we symbolically receive the kingdom promised by God (2:5). On the other hand, we sometimes ask, but we do not receive (*lambanete*), because we ask with wrong motives (4:3).

That does not mean, however, that there is no room for rich people in the church.

We must only avoid sparing our kindness to benefit those who have money or social status. Plutocracy hurts God's heart because it puts us in the same condition as Laodicea, the Asian church that had need of nothing even God (Rev 3:17). Is it not a sign of the times that too many Christians today feel so comfortable with obsequiousness and sycophancy? It is indeed a noble side to the epistle of James that it shows that we are all in the same stand before God and what we bring in our hearts is much more valuable than the clothes we bring on our bodies (James 2:2-4). I can hear James's voice clearly when he says that one's face (and its fleeting beauty, falsehearted attempts at fame, power hunger, status seeking, and bogus appearance of material wealth) should never be more important than one's heart.