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Abstract
Although a few interpreters have noted in passing the numerous verbal links between James 3:13–4:10 and LXX Prov 3:21–35, James’ passage is regularly read as a polemic against jealousy that is most at home within Hellenistic moral literature. This paper argues that the literary and thematic coherence of James 3:13–4:10 derives not primarily from the Hellenistic topos on envy (so Luke Timothy Johnson) but from metaleptic interplay with Prov 3:21–35. That is, the explicit appeal to “the scripture” in James 4:5 and the citation of Prov 3:34 in James 4:6 indicate that the tropes usually interpreted against the backdrop of Hellenistic moral literature (friendship, violence, etc.) resonate more naturally within the “cave” of Proverbs 3. Like many passages in sapiential literature (e.g., Prov 14:1, 19; 4Q416 2ii11; 4Q418 8,12; Wis 1:9-12; Sir 9:1-11), Jas 3:13-4:10 foregrounds the language of “jealousy” to expose the tragedy of bad ζῆ��ος. In trying to locate parallels to James’ usage in Hellenistic writings, interpreters have failed to appreciate how the movement from ζη��ος in James 3:14, 16, and 4:2 to φθόνος in 4:5 simply resonates with a description found already in Isocrates: an envious person (φθόνος) is one whose good emulation (ζη��ος) has degenerated into jealous imitation because of unfulfilled desires. More significant than the particular semantic choices, then, is that James’ usage mimics the way Prov 3:31 links θη��ος with the neglect of the needy, distorted friendship, and emulating the ways of evil/violent people (Prov 3:27, 29, 31). Using this wisdom motif from Prov 3:21–35 as the interpretive lens for James 3:13–4:10 lends further support to a growing consensus about the notorious interpretive crux in James 4:5; namely, (1) that the formula in 4:5 does not introduce a citation of an unknown text, and (2) that it is the human spirit (rather than God’s) that is characterized by “envy” (φθόνος).

Keywords
James, Proverbs, language, envy, biblical interpretation

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Letters of James, Peter, and Jude

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Theme: Letters of James, Peter, and Jude in the Context of Second Temple Jewish Literature

ABSTRACT:

Although a few interpreters have noted in passing the numerous verbal links between Jas 3:13–4:10 and LXX Prov 3:21–35, James’ passage is regularly read as a polemic against jealousy that is most at home within Hellenistic moral literature. This paper argues that the literary and thematic coherence of Jas 3:13–4:10 derives not primarily from the Hellenistic topos on envy (so Luke Timothy Johnson) but from metaleptic interplay with Prov 3:21–35. That is, the explicit appeal to “the scripture” in Jas 4:5 and the citation of Prov 3:34 in Jas 4:6 indicate that the tropes usually interpreted against the backdrop of Hellenistic moral literature (friendship, violence, etc.) resonate more naturally within the “cave” of Proverbs 3. Like many passages in sapiential literature (e.g., Prov 14:1, 19; 4Q416 2ii11; 4Q418 8,12; Wis 1:9-12; Sir 9:1-11), Jas 3:13-4:10 foregrounds the language of “jealousy” to expose the tragedy of bad ζῆλος. In trying to locate parallels to James’ usage in Hellenistic writings, interpreters have failed to appreciate how the movement from ζῆλος in Jas 3:14, 16, and 4:2 to φθόνος in 4:5 simply resonates with a description found already in Isocrates: an envious person (φθόνος) is one whose good emulation (ζῆλος) has degenerated into jealous imitation because of unfulfilled desires. More significant than the particular semantic choices, then, is that James’ usage mimics the way Prov 3:31 links קָנָה/ζῆλος with the neglect of the needy, distorted friendship, and emulating the ways of evil/violent people (Prov 3:27, 29, 31). Using this wisdom motif from Prov 3:21–35 as the interpretive lens for Jas 3:13–4:10 lends further support to a growing consensus about the notorious interpretive crux in Jas 4:5; namely, (1) that the formula in 4:5 does not introduce a citation of an unknown text, and (2) that it is the human spirit (rather than God’s) that is characterized by “envy” (φθόνος).

1. The Thematic Coherence of James 3:13–4:10 and the Hellenistic Topos on Envy

T. Sim. 2.6–7, 13: In the time of my youth I was jealous [ἐζήλωσα] of Joseph…[and] the spirit of jealousy [τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ ζῆλου] blinded my mind…. I repented and wept; and I prayed to the Lord God that my hand be restored, and that I might refrain from all defilement and envy [φθόνου] and all foolishness.

2. Jas 3:13-4:10 as a Reading of Proverbs 3 (LXX)

2.1 James and the Paraenetic Tradition

1 Pet 5:5: And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility [ταπεινοφροσύνη] toward one another, since “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

Ignatius, Eph. 5.3: Therefore whoever does not meet with [the congregation] is now proud [ὑπερηφανεῖ] and has separated himself, for it is written: “God opposes the proud.”

1 Clem. 30.1–2 [L]et us do all the things that pertain to holiness, forsaking…detestable pride [ὑπερηφανία]. For “God,” it says, “opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

2.2 Intertextuality
2.3 Verbal and Thematic Parallels with Proverbs 3 (LXX)

James (my translation)

Jas 2:6 But you have dishonored [ὑπιμάστε] the poor....
Jas 2:15 If a brother or sister is naked and is lacking daily food, 16 and one of you should say to them, “Go in peace [εἰρήνη]; be warmed and filled,” and yet you do not give them their bodily needs, what is the gain? ...

Jas 3:10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing [ἐυλογία καὶ κατάφρα]...
Jas 3:13 Who is wise [σοφὸς] and understanding among you? Show by your good [χαλῆς] lifestyle that your works [ἔργα] are done in a gentleness from wisdom [σοφίας]. 14 But if you have bitter zeal [ζῆλος] and strive in your hearts, do not boast and lie with respect to the truth. 15 Such wisdom [σοφία] does not come down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. 16 For where there is zeal [ζῆλος] and strife, there also is disorder and every evil deed. 17 But the wisdom [σοφία] from above is pure, then peaceable [εἰρηνική] and gentle, open to reason, full of mercy [ἐλεοῦσ] and good fruits [καρπῶν ἀγαθῶν], impartial, sincere. 18 And the fruit of righteousness [καρπῶν δικαιοσύνης] is sown in peace [εἰρήνη] for those who make peace [εἰρήνην].

4:1 From where are those conflicts, and from where the quarrels [μάχαι] among you? Are they not from here, from come from your cravings [θάνον] waging war in your body parts? 2 You desire and do not have, you murder, and you are jealous [φθόνον] and you are not able to obtain, you quarrel [μάχεσθε] and fight; you do not have, because you do not ask, 3 you ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly [χαλῆς], in order to spend freely on your cravings.

4 Aluturers, do you not know that friendship [φίλεῖς] with the world is enmity [ἐχθρεία] with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend [φίλεῖς] of the world makes himself an enemy [ἐχθρεία] of God. 5 Or do you suppose that the Scripture speaks in vain concerning jealousely [πρὶς φθόνον]? The spirit that he has made to dwell in us desires [ἐπιποθεῖ] 6 But he gives greater grace [χάρις], therefore it says, “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” [ὁ θεὸς ὑπερθερμανοῖς αντιτάσσεται, ταπεινοῖς δὲ δίδωσιν χάριν]. 7 Therefore submit yourselves to God, resist the devil, and he will flee from you; 8 draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse [καθαρίσατε] yourselves of any hand, sinners, and purify [ἀνέπιστε] your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and joy into gloom. 10 Humble [ταπεινωθῆτε] yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt [ὑψώσῃ] you.... 14 You do not know the things of tomorrow [αύριον].

Proverbs (New English Translation of the Septuagint)

Prov 3:9 Honor [τίμα] the Lord from your just [δικαιοσύνης] labors, and offer him of your firstfruits of righteousness [καρπῶν δικαιοσύνης]....
Prov 3:15 And she is more precious [τιμωρῆτά] than precious stones; nothing evil shall resist her; she is well-known to all those who draw near to her, and nothing valuable [τιμιον] is worthy of her; 16 out of her mouth righteousness comes forth, and she carries law and mercy [ἐλεοῦ] upon her tongue. 17 Her ways are good ways [δέοι καλής], and all her paths are peaceful [εἰρηνικός]. 18 She is a tree of life to all those who lay claim to her, and she is steadfast to those who lean upon her, as on the Lord. 19 God by wisdom [σοφία] founded the earth, and he prepared the heavens by prudence. 20 By perception the deeps were broken open, and the clouds poured dew. 21 My son, do not break away, but keep my counsel and insight 22 so that your soul may live and that there may be grace [χάρις] round your neck. And it shall be healing to your flesh and treatment for your bones, 23 that you may walk all your ways confidently in peace [εἰρηνικός] and that your foot will not stumble. 24 For if you sit down, you will be without fear, and when you lie down, you will sleep pleasantly. 25 And you shall not be afraid of intimidation when it comes, nor of attacks [ἐνίσχυσιν] of the impious who trust in the wicked 26 For the Lord will be over all your ways and he will support your foot in order that you may not be unsettled. 27 Do not withhold to do good [ἐὖ ποιεῖν] to the needy, when your hand can help. 28 Do not say, “Go, come back, and tomorrow [αύριον] I will give,” when you are able to do good [ἐὖ ποιεῖν] for you do not know what the next day will bring. 29 Do not plan evil [κακόν] against your friend [φίλον] when he lives besides you and trusts in you. 30 Do not quarrel [Φιλεχθρησκοῦς] with anyone without a cause, lest he does [ἐγκακίση] some harm [κακόν] to you. 31 Do not acquire the disgrace of evil [κακόν] men, and do not strive [χηρῆς] after their ways, 32 for every transgressor is impure [ἀκάθαρτος] before the Lord, and he does not sit in council among the righteous [δικαιοσύνης]. 33 A divine curse [κάταφρα] is in the homes of the impious, but the abodes of the just [δικαιοσύνης] are blessed [καταφρουσταία]. 34 The Lord resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble [χάρις ὑπερθερμανοῖς αντιτάσσεται, ταπεινοῖς δὲ δίδωσιν χάριν]. 35 The wise [σοφὸς] will inherit glory [ἐξόντα], but the impious have exalted [ὑψωσάντες] disgrace [αύλωσαν].

Prov 17:1 Better is a morsel with pleasure in peace [δεξίων ἐν εἰρήνη], than a house full of many good things [ἀγαθῶν] and unjust [ἀθυμόν] sacrifices with strife [μάχεք].
3. Readings of Proverbs in Jewish Sapiential Literature

3.1. The Wisdom of Solomon, the Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides, and Sirach

Wis 1:12: Do not have zeal for ζῆλος death by the error of your life or bring destruction on yourselves by the deeds of your hands.
Wis 2:24: Through the envy φθόνος of the devil death entered the world, and those who belong to his party experience it.
Wis 6:23: Nor indeed will I travel in the company of consumptive envy φθόνος, because this can have no fellowship with wisdom.

Ps.-Phoc. 70–75: Do not envy others for their goods μὴ φθονέοις ἀγαθῶν ἑταρίοις… For if there were strife ἔρις among the blessed, the city would not stand.

Sir 9:1: Do not be jealous μὴ ζήλου of the wife of your bosom, nor teach an evil lesson against yourself.
Sir 9:11: Do not envy μὴ ζηλώσῃς a sinner’s fame, for you do not know what his ruin will be.

3.2. Sapiential Texts from Qumran and the Language of Zeal (קנאה)

4Q418 f8:6 [do not] exchange your holy spirit [for any amount of money,]…
4Q418 f8:11 … [do not let any money be left over] without […] lest he should say, He has defrauded me and […]
4Q418 f8:12 […] and behold how] powerful is human jealousy קנא. It deceives the heart […]

4Q424 f3:7 A man of insight will receive understanding, a man of knowledge can recognize wisdom […]
4Q424 f3:8 An honest man will take pleasure in good judgment. A man of truth […] a strong man will be zealous קנא for […]
4Q424 f3:9 [and he disputes] with those who would shift the boundaries. A man of compassion does justice to the needy […]
4Q424 f3:10 […] concern for all those who lack money, the children of the righteous […]

1QS 4:2–5: One enlightens a man’s mind, making straight before him the paths of true righteousness and causing his heart to fear the laws of God. And this is a spirit of humility ענוה, patience, great compassion רחם, everlasting goodness טוב, insight, understanding, and mighty wisdom entrusting to each of God’s deeds, sustained by his abundant mercy. A spirit of knowledge of every plan of action, and of zeal for the laws of righteousness קנא, holy in thought, and firm in inclination.

1QS 4:9–10: The operations of the spirit of falsehood result in greed, neglect of righteous deeds, wickedness, lying, pride and haughtiness, cruel deceit and fraud, massive hypocrisy, a want of self-control and abundant foolishness, a zeal קנא for arrogance, abominable deeds fashioned by whorish desire, lechery in its filthy manifestation,
1QS 4:18: Zeal attends every point of decision משפטיהןכולעלריבוזקנא, for they can never agree.
1QS 4:23: Until now the spirits of truth and perversity have contended within the human heart.

4Q525 f2ii+3:3: Blessed is the man who attains wisdom, and walks in the law of the Most High [ʾアחא אדס]…; cf. Prov 3:13 MT: Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, and those who get understanding קנא, אושר אדם מוצא חכמה אושר אדם יachable מכות and ʾאחא אדס אושר אדם מוצא חכמה אושר אדם يachable מכות.

4Q525 f5:13–f7:5: Those who love God walk humbly in it and in [the] way of […] without answer and having zeal קנא without […] that he might not understand because of an errant spirit […] that he might not] know because of a perverted spirit […] with weakness and causes stumbling with[out […] certainty and sends away without…pride and exalts קנא without […] and honors[… without …] because of the inclination of […] thoughts […] because of a troubled קנא spirit.
4. The Progression from ζήλος to φθόνος in Jas 3:13–4:10

Isocrates, Antid. 244–259: I am of the opinion that...all those who are envious of my success covet the ability to think and speak well...[T]hey grow irritated, jealous [ζηλοτυπεῖν], perturbed in spirit…. They envy [ζηλοῦσι] the good fortune of [others].... I do not want to descend to the level of men whom envy [φθόνος] has made blind.

5. Implications for the Interpretive Crux in Jas 4:5–6

Jas 4:5: ἢ δοκεῖτε ὅτι κενὸς ἡ γραφὴ λέγει πρὸς φθόνον ἐπιποθεῖ τὸ πνεῦμα ὅ κατῴκισεν ἐν ἡμῖν


NRSV: Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, “God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”?
NIV 1984: Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?
NIV 2011: Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?
CEB: Or do you suppose that scripture is meaningless? Doesn’t God long for our faithfulness in the life he has given to us?
Vulgate: aut putatis quia inaniter scriptura dicat ad invidiam concupiscit Spiritus qui inhabitat in nobis
Luther Bible: Oder meint ihr, die Schrift sage umsonst: Mit Eifer wacht Gott über den Geist, den er in uns hat wohnen lassen?

Select Bibliography


