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James 3:13-4:10 and the Language of Envy in Proverbs 3:21-35

Benjamin J. Lappenga

Dordt College, benjamin.lappenga@dordt.edu

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James 3:13-4:10 and the Language of Envy in Proverbs 3:21-35

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 ζήλος. In trying to locate parallels to James’ usage in Hellenistic writings, interpreters have failed to appreciate how the movement from ζήλος 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 (ζήλος) 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 האבנא/ζήλος 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

Disciplines

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Comments

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James 3:13-4:10 and the Language of Envy in Proverbs 3:21-35

Benjamin J. Lappenga, Dordt College

Letters of James, Peter, and Jude

11/21/2015 4:00 PM to 6:30 PM Room: 209 (Level 2) - Hilton

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 ζήλος. In trying to locate parallels to James’ usage in Hellenistic writings, interpreters have failed to appreciate how the movement from ζήλος 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 (ζήλος) 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 πικρὸς/ζήλος 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 ζήλου] 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 [ὑπερηφανεί] 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 [ἡτιμάσατε] 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 [εὐλογία καὶ κατάρα]...

Jas 3:13 Who is wise [σοφός] and understanding among you? Show by your good [καλῆς] lifestyle that your works [ἔργα] are done in a gentleness from wisdom [σοφίας]. **14** But if you have bitter zeal [ζῆλον] and strife 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], gentle, open to reason, full of mercy [ἐλέους] and good fruits [καρπῶν ἀγαθῶν], impartial, sincere. **18** And the fruit of righteousness [καρπός... 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 [ἡδονῶν] waging war in your body parts? **2** You desire and do not have, you murder, and you are zealous [ζηλοῦτε] 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 [κακῶς], in order to spend freely on your cravings.

4 Adulterers, do you not know that friendship [φιλία] with the world is enmity [ἔχθρα] with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend [φιλία] of the world makes himself an enemy [ἐχθρός] of God. **5** Or do you suppose that the Scripture speaks in vain concerning jealousy [πρὸς 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 ὑπερηφάνους ἀντιτάσσεται, 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] your hands, sinners, and purify [ἀγνίσατε] your hearts, you double-minded. **9** Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and joy into gloom. **10** Humble [ταπεινώθητε] yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt [ὑψώσει] you....

14 You do not know the things of tomorrow [αὔριον].

Proverbs (New English Translation of the Septuagint)

Prov 3:9 Honor [τίμα] the Lord from your just [δικαίων] labors, and offer him of your firstfruits of righteousness [καρπῶν δικαιοσύνης]....

Prov 3:15 And she is more precious [τιμιωτέρα] than precious stones; nothing evil shall resist her; she is well-known to all those who draw near to her, and nothing valuable [τίμιον] is worthy of her; **16** out of her mouth righteousness comes forth, and she carries law and mercy [ἔλεον] upon her tongue. **17** Her ways are good ways [ὁδοὶ καλαί], and all her paths are peaceful [ἐν εἰρήνῃ]. **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 [εἰρήνη] 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 [ὀρμάς; cf. Jas 3:4] of the impious, when they approach. **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 [εὖ ποιεῖν] to the needy, when your hand can help. **28** Do not say, “Go, come back, and tomorrow [αὔριον] I will give,” when you are able to do good [εὖ ποιεῖν], for you do not know what the next day will bring. **29** Do not plan evil [κακά] against your friend [φίλον] when he lives besides you and trusts in you. **30** Do not quarrel [φιλεχθρήσης] with anyone without a cause, lest he does [ἐργάσθαι] some harm [κακόν] to you. **31** Do not acquire the disgrace of evil [κακῶν] men, and do not strive [ζηλώσης] after their ways, **32** for every transgressor is impure [ἀκάθαρτος] before the Lord, and he does not sit in council among the righteous [δίκαιοις]. **33** A divine curse [κατάρα] is in the homes of the impious, but the abodes of the just [δικαίων] are blessed [εὐλογοῦνται]. **34** The Lord resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble [κύριος ὑπερηφάνους ἀντιτάσσεται, ταπεινοῖς δὲ δίδωσιν χάριν].

35 The wise [σοφοί] will inherit glory [δόξαν], but the impious have exalted [ὑψωσαν] disgrace [ἀτιμίαν]....

Prov 17:1 Better is a morsel with pleasure in peace [ἡδονῆς ἐν εἰρήνῃ] than a house full of many good things [ἀγαθῶν] and unjust [ἀδίκων] sacrifices with strife [μάχης].

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 [ζηλοῦτε] 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 ἐτάροις]...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 [קנאת]. It deceives the heart [...]

4Q424 f3:7 A man of insight will receive under[standing,] 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 [יקנא] for [...]

4Q424 f3:9 [and h]e disputes with those who would shift the boundaries. A man of compa[ssion 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 [רחמים], 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 [קנאת קדש], 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 [קנאת] for arrogance, abominable deeds fashioned by whorish desire, lechery in its filthy manifestation,

1QS 4:18: Zeal attends every point of decision [וקנאת ריב על כל משפטיהן], 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 [אשרי אדם] [השיג חוכמה ויתהלך בתורת עליון ויכן לדרכיה לבו] cf. Prov 3:13 MT: Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, and those who get understanding [אשרי אדם מצא חכמה ואדם יפיק תבונה].

4Q525 f5:13–f7:5: Those who love God walk humbly in it and in [the] wa[ys of...] [...without] answer and having zeal [ומקנאת] without [...] that he might not understand because of an erra[nt] spirit [...] that he might not] know because of a perverted spirit [...] with weakness and causes stumbling witho[ut ...] certainty and sends away without...pride and exalts [גאווה] [ומרימת] without [...] and]honor[s without ...] because of the inclination of [...] thoughts [...] because of a troubl[ed] 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: ἡ δοκεῖτε ὅτι κενῶς ἡ γραφή λέγει πρὸς φθόνον ἐπιποθεῖ τὸ πνεῦμα ὃ κατώκισεν ἐν ἡμῖν

Johnston (2013) following Spitta (1896): Or do you think that the Scripture [*Lappenga*: Proverbs 3] speaks uselessly in reference to jealousy? The [human] spirit, which [God] caused to dwell in us, inordinately desires.

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?

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