

FAITH, WORKS AND JUSTIFICATION: AN EXEGESIS OF JAMES 2:14-26

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Faith, works and justification in James 2 has created much controversy in the history of interpretation. Martin Luther said that the epistle of James is an “epistle of straw”. This paper will first demonstrate that there is no contradiction with Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith alone as he describes in Romans 4:1-8 and James 2:14-26. As a starting point we must say that these accounts must be harmonized. The two accounts that must be harmonized are James 2:24 (NKJV) where James states, “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone” and; and Romans 3:28 (NKJV), “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.”¹ James Buchanan says that it is important to harmonize the accounts because it is essential to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy as well as the doctrine of inspiration.

It is equally evident that there can be no real contradiction between the two, since both Apostles wrote under the inspiration of the same Spirit of Truth; and it is the first duty, therefore, of all parties to ascertain their real meaning by a careful collation of their respective lines of thought as these are developed in the context and are illustrated by other passages of scripture; and thereafter to show that, when thus interpreted, they are in perfect accordance with each other and with the general "analogy of faith."²

Although these passages will be found to be in harmony with one another, James must be allowed to speak for himself and one must not interpret James in light of Paul. But after a thorough exegesis of James, it should be found that James 2:14-26 coalesces with Paul in

¹ All scriptural quotations will be taken from the New King James Version of the Bible.

² James Buchanan, "The Doctrine of Justification," *Presbyterian* 9, no. 1-2 (Spring- Fall 1983): 11-12.

Romans 3:28; 4:1-8.

The methodology of this paper is to properly interpret James 2:14-26, in an exegetical fashion. This passage will be examined using the following outline that includes three subsections: 1) inactive faith which is dead and profitless 2:14-17; 2) two types of false faith: a faith that is separate from works and a faith that is mere intellectual ascent to a certain creed (2:18-19); 3) two illustrations of genuine faith: the example of Abraham and then Rahab. This section concludes with a repetition of the principle that faith without works is dead, just as the body without the spirit is dead (2:20-26).³ The outline will be used to guide the exegesis of James 2:14-26 while placing special emphasis on the terms faith, works and justification. When this is accomplished the author hopes to show that a proper contextual exegesis will demonstrate that James does use some of these terms differently than Paul and it is at this point that one can see how both Paul and James will harmonize quite nicely.

James 2:14-26 in Light of its Literary Context

When attempting to interpret James 2:14-26 as well as any passage of scripture it is vitally important to understand the historical and the literary context.⁴ This epistle is

³ This outline is taken from Dan McCartney in the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Dan G. McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 154-55.

⁴ The salutation of James 1:1 states only “James a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus” (James 1:1, NKJV). Thus there is an issue as to which James wrote the book. There are four candidates, James the Lord’s brother, James son of Alphaeus, James father of Judas and James son of Zebedee and brother of the apostle John. The issue of authorship is beyond the scope of this paper, for the sake of brevity the present writer will assume that the epistle was written by James the Lord’s brother, although in recent times the issue of authorship has been hotly debated. The traditional view of authorship is that James the Lord’s brother wrote the epistle. For a thoroughly analysis of the authorship issue see the following: Douglass Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 9-22; and Luke Timothy

not an occasional letter as many of the Pauline letters but it has been labeled as a paraenetic encyclical.⁵ This means that it is an official letter in which James as the leader of the Jerusalem church is addressing his fellow Christian Jews of the Diaspora. It is most likely that several copies were dispatched and delivered to important communities in the Jewish Diaspora. It is deemed a paraenetic letter because it gives exhortations on certain forms of Christian conduct.⁶ Because the letter resembles paraenetic encyclical wisdom literature, its content takes on a form much like that of the proverbs in which certain themes are loosely strung together. James does not seem to be addressing specific issues that he knows are going on in the church but only certain typical situations that the Jews of the Diaspora were most likely facing, such as suffering (1:2-4; 12-15); partiality in the synagogues (2:1-10); the relationship of faith and works (2:14-26); disputes amongst fellow Christians (4:1-4); and oppression of the poor by the rich (1:9-11; 5:1-6). Richard Bauckham says, “The teaching James provides does not meet the needs of a particular moment. It is the teaching the Jewish Christians of the Diaspora might need at any time.”⁷

Therefore James was written as paraenetic encyclical letter exhorting Messianic Christians how they ought to live and act in the Diaspora. But as Bauckham concludes this letter also belongs to a strong literary tradition of Jewish wisdom literature. James teaching of wisdom resembles both the book of proverbs with short topical teachings of wisdom as well as the wisdom teaching of Jesus. James has captured

Johnson, *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

⁵Richard Bauckham, *James* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 25-28.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. , 28.

the wisdom of Jesus and set it in a thoroughly Christian context. Bauckham observes,

Our thesis will be that James, as a disciple of Jesus the sage, is a wisdom teacher that has made the wisdom of Jesus his own, and who seeks to appropriate and to develop the resources of the Jewish wisdom tradition in a way that is guided and controlled by the teaching of Jesus. More than any other New Testament writer James is a teacher in the style of Jesus.⁸

This understanding of James set in its literary context will aid in the exegesis of James 2:14-26. James is a somewhat different genre than the apostle Paul's letters who seems to write mainly occasional letters meant to deal with specific issues at hand in the local churches. Thus it becomes very likely that they are developing different issues in relation to faith, justification and works. Also because James relies much on the wisdom teaching of Jesus this will also help in determining the meaning of certain lexical and syntactical issues.

The Immediate Context of James 2:14-26

It is extremely important to examine the immediate context that surrounds James 2:14-26 before embarking on a thorough exegesis. There seems to be a strong emphasis of works in James. Starting with chapter 1:19 the readers are exhorted to live godly lives by being quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger because the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God (1:20). James gives a vice list of sin to put off and exhorts his readers to receive in meekness the engrafted word which is able to save the soul (1:21). Chapter 1:22-25 continues James' emphasis on works and he again exhorts his readers to "...be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving themselves." James says,

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural

⁸ Ibid., 30.

face in a mirror; ²⁴ for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. ²⁵ But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues *in it*, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.⁹

Donald J. Verseput says, “Despite its lack of faith terminology, the closing segment of James 1 does indeed give evidence of a thematic continuity with the ensuing discussion of faith and works.”¹⁰

In the next pericope James explains that “to visit orphans and widows in their trouble and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” are works that constitute pure and undefiled religion (1:26-27). The text (2:1-13) that immediately precedes chapter 2:14-26 has a continued emphasis on works as seen in James’ warning about the sin of partiality (2:1-4), his exhortation to fulfill the royal law (2:8), and James’ statement on speaking and doing as those who will be judged by the law of liberty (2:12-13). Therefore James places a significant emphasis on works and shows that the believer’s faith should reflect good works. Some have also seen certain parallel structures between 2:1-13 and 2:14-26, which ties these sections together with the common theme of works of the believer. Both sections “show case studies” from church life (2:2-4 and 2:15f., these case studies are introduced by ἐάν plus the subjunctive); both sections have expositions of scripture that follow (2:8-11 and 2:21-25); in both sections when one makes a theologically accurate statement James uses the phrase, καλῶς ποιεῖτε (2:8 and 2:19).¹¹ James 2:1-13 and

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¹⁰ Donald J. Verseput, "Reworking the Puzzle of Faith and Deeds in James 2:14-26," *New Testament Studies* 43, no. 1 (Jan 1997): 101.

¹¹ Popkes, Wiard, "Two Interpretations of "Justification" in the New Testament Reflections on Galatians 2:15-21 and James 2:21-25," *Studia Theologica* 59, no. 2 (2005): 132.

James 2:24-26 are not only tied together structurally but they also are tied together by the common theme of riches and poverty. James 2:14-26 continues to unpack the theme of riches and poverty that began in 2:1-13. This is often missed because many commentators miss the connection of James 2:14-26 with the rest of the book because they tend to become myopic on the issue of harmonizing James 2:20-26 with Paul's doctrine of the justification by faith alone.¹² Craig Blomberg says,

James insistence on faith without works is dead follows as a corollary from the theme of vv. 1-13, further illustrated by the shocking refusal of some so-called Christians to offer even the slightest help to the most destitute in their midst (vv. 14-17).¹³

James 2:14-26 is not as connected to what follows in 3:1-12 because James switches topics to a second key theme- wisdom and speech. But there are echoes of James 2:14-26 in the remainder of the letter especially when the theme of rich and poor is reintroduced (cf. 5:3-4), and Abraham being called a friend of God anticipates the contrast of friendship with the world is enmity to God (4:4).¹⁴

Inactive Faith that is Dead and Profitless: James 2:14-17

This section introduces James' main theme for the rest of the chapter, inactive faith or dead faith. James 2:14 opens up with two rhetorical questions and an asyndeton which shows that there is a new topic being discussed.¹⁵ Although the topic of works has permeated the first two chapters of James, James does shift the topic slightly away from

¹² Craig L. Blomberg, and Mariam J. Kamell, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 125.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Doug J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 122.

the theme of partiality (2:1-13) to the topic of an inactive faith. The first rhetorical question asks, “What does it profit my brothers if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” James addresses them as brothers and shows that he is addressing them as the people of God. Notice also that James is speaking about someone saying or claiming (λέγει) to have faith. James does not say that someone has actual genuine faith but rather that someone claims to have faith. McCartney says, “The claim to faith is not the same as faith.”¹⁶ The faith that is unable to save is the faith that this person claims to have, but it does not have works. The question is can that faith save him. The article before the second occurrence of ἡ πίστις is called the article of previous reference, which means that it is pointing back to first occurrence of the word. Thus the faith that James was speaking of is a faith that does not have works that accompany it. This is the faith that cannot save. McCartney says,

It cannot mean “Can the [Christian] faith save him,” nor is it likely to be an abstraction (“Can faith abstractly considered save him”); instead, it is referring to the specific kind of “faith” of the person who claims to believe in God but has not commensurate deeds. James, in other words, is asking, “Can that [inactive] kind of faith save him?”¹⁷

The rhetorical question “can that faith save him” expects a negative answer due to the use of the negative particle μή. Therefore, this type of faith (a faith without works) does not save.

¹⁶ Dan G. McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 155.

¹⁷ Ibid. James Adamson also affirms the worthless nature of a faith that does not have works when he says, “This latter kind of faith is impotent, unable to save, without works ipso facto without worth.” James Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976), 121-122.

The Meaning of σωσαι

This raises the next issue. What does the word save (σωσαι) mean in this context? Given the usage of the word in James, in both 1:21 and 5:20 the word is used of eschatological deliverance and σωσαι here refers to the same thing, eschatological deliverance from the judgment of God and not just earthly rescue.¹⁸ Dibelius says,

That Christian faith saves is the common Christian conviction, and since early Christianity is an eschatological religion this conviction relates chiefly to the final judgment. Hence, this is the obvious meaning here also, since “is able” (δύναται) points to the future rather than to the past: Is faith able to save him, once that time comes?¹⁹

Zane Hodges has a different view concerning the meaning of σωσαι in James 2:14. He says that the term means earthly or temporal deliverance from the devastating effects of sins. James is not addressing unbelievers concerning salvation but he is addressing deliverance from the temporal judgment of God on sin (5:11) and their vindication before others as to whether they are friends of God (2:23) or carnal Christians (1 Cor 3:1-3).²⁰ Therefore, for Hodges this passage shows whether someone is vindicated before men in a non salvific context, and shows if someone is either a spiritual Christian or a just a carnal Christian (1 Cor 3:1-3). The majority of commentaries do not support this view and the present author could not find any commentaries that agree with Hodges view of the meaning of σωσαι . BDAG also defines σωσαι in the context of James 2 as to save or

¹⁸ Moo, *James*, 156.

¹⁹ James Dibelius, *James* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 152.

²⁰ Ryan C. Jenkins, "Faith and Works in Paul and James," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159, no. 633 (Ja- Ma 2002): 63.

preserve from transcendent danger or destruction, *save/preserve from eternal death*.²¹

Every time the word occurs in James except once (5:15), the word refers to eternal eschatological salvation (cf. 1:21, 2:14, 4:12: 5:20). Of these references it is also revealing that in 4:12 σῶσαι is juxtaposed with ἀπολέσαι which strongly argues for (σῶσαι) to mean deliverance from judgment as opposed to eternal destruction (ἀπολέσαι). Only in James 5:15 could σώσει signify temporal deliverance from sickness. But the context makes clear that the lexical meaning of the word σωσαι in James 2 is eternal deliverance from judgment.

Continuing the argument in verse 15, James provides a vivid illustration of inactive or dead faith. He says, If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food,¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what *does it* profit? Ropes and Blomberg understands this as a parable or an illustration while other commentators (Moo, Dibelius, Adamson) understand this to be real situation in the church.²² The ἐὰν with the present subjunctive ὑπάρχωσιν makes a third class conditional sentence which is a probable future condition; this confirms that this situation was likely to arise in one of the

²¹ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W., *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. σῶσω.

²² Ralph P. Martin, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary vol. 48 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 84. Either view seems likely because they are not mutually exclusive if we understand R. Baucham’s literary analysis, which classified this letter as a paranaetic encyclical, meaning that these were typical situations likely to arise for the dispersed Jews living outside of Palestine, but they are not necessarily exact situations.

churches of the dispersion. The present tense of ὑπάρχωσιν shows that poverty is a continual state for those that are mentioned in verse 15. Both the brother and sister are said to be poorly clothed. γυμνοὶ is probably meant to mean that the brother or sister lacked adequate clothing and possibly were without an outer garment, but not that they were totally naked (John 21:7; Matt 25:36).²³ The present participle λειπόμενοι shows that lacking daily food was an ongoing condition. There seems to be an echo of the Lord's Prayer, "give us this day our daily bread" (Matt 6:11). The situation was that there were brothers and sisters who lacked the daily necessities of food and clothing and verse 16 shows that the believers in the church did not give proper aid to their brethren.

Verse 16 completes the illustration of the fact that faith without works is dead. Blomberg states, "rhetorically, he (James) returns to his original question in v. 14, showing this inadequate response to a person's need to be an illustration of faith without works."²⁴ James is illustrating the absolute absurdity of the statement that one can have faith without works. It is like bidding a blessing on a destitute brother or sister that lacks proper food and clothing, without taking any action whatsoever to help them. They may be nice words but they are of no actual value. Verse 16 contains words that are direct speech (oratio recta) of someone in the congregation to the poor and destitute brother or sister, πάγετε ἐν εἰρήνῃ, θερμαίνεσθε καὶ χορτάζεσθε, "go in peace, be warmed and be filled."²⁵ The greeting, "go in peace" is a common blessing among the Jews, which

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Blomberg, *James*, 130.

²⁵ All Greek texts are quoted from the UBS 4th edition. Aland, K., Black, M.,

they used when greeting one another and when they said farewell. McCartney even thinks that these greetings of “be warmed and be filled” show a sense of mockery to the needy.²⁶ The greeting “go in peace” taken together with the exhortation, “be warmed and be filled” shows the total inadequacy of someone’s “well wishing” to provide the actual help that the poor brother or sister needs and this becomes a great example of the inadequacy of dead faith. McCartney says again,

Thus, the faith-deed of provision for a fellow believer’s hunger or nakedness is a particularly apt example, not only because it emphasizes the necessity of love of neighbor in the church, but also because the needy person receives no benefit from nice words, just as the profession Christian receives no benefit from inactive faith.²⁷

Verse 16 ends by making a statement, “and you do not give them the things necessary of the body, what does it profit? The answer to the rhetorical question is that it profits nothing. To wish someone well but not giving them the things necessary is of no value and as James will assert that this is an apt illustration of a faith that has no works.²⁸ The question, τί τὸ ὄφελος, what does it profit, serves as an inclusio, and shows that James thinks that he has adequately answered the initial question of verse 14 by this convicting

Martini, C. M., Metzger, B. M., Robinson, M., & Wikgren, A. (1993; 2006). *The Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition (with Morphology)* (Jas 2:20). Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

²⁶ McCartney, *James*, 157.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ This reminds one of the words of Jesus in Matthew 25:44-46, ⁴⁴ “Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ ⁴⁵ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do *it* to one of the least of these, you did not do *it* to Me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” Therefore either the absence or presence of these deeds indicated whether one had a true saving faith or not. Thus James has the same thinking as Jesus on this issue.

illustration. Just as words without action do not profit the poor brother, likewise faith without works do not profit professing Christian.²⁹

Verse 17 reads, οὕτως καὶ ἡ πίστις, ἐὰν μὴ ἔχη ἔργα, νεκρὰ ἐστὶν καθ' ἑαυτήν, “Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” Verse 17 serves to summarize vv. 14-16 as well as lengthen the inclusio that has begun at the end of verse 16, by repeating language from verse 14.³⁰ The first word in the verse, οὕτως is a word that James uses when applying an example or a metaphor (1:11, 2:26, 3:5). Now James is ready to draw out some implications on what is true saving faith.

The faith that James is referring to is the same faith that he has already referred to in verse 14, which is a faith that has no works.³¹ James is speaking very directly and he says that this faith is a completely dead faith, not just sick or even dying, but dead. This would be repugnant to a Jew who had strict laws regulating how one is to treat a dead body, because coming into contact with a dead body would make one ceremonially unclean. So James' dead faith would definitely be a pejorative image. McCartney paraphrases James as saying, “If your faith does not benefit others, it will not benefit you either.”³² Thus James believes that a true saving faith includes works. For James saving faith demonstrates itself in a life of sanctification.³³ Motyer brings out the fact that faith

²⁹ Blomberg, *James*, 131.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ ἡ πίστις- as it was in verse 14, the article is the article of previous reference, and it refers to a kind of faith that is unaccompanied by works.

³² McCartney, *James*, 157.

³³ Blomberg, *James* 131.

produces the works and it is not faith and works but for James it is the works that precede from faith. Motyer says, “After all, in verse 17 it is faith which possesses (has) works; in verse 22 it is faith which is the dominant partner in its colleague- relationship with works. We must say, therefore, not ‘faith and works’, but faith productive of works.”³⁴

This passage also helps to define what James means by works. He means something different than how Paul use the term “works of the law”. Works for James are good deeds done to one’s fellow man or his brethren. These works are the sum total of a changed life that is brought about by faith. A faith that does not lead to the inevitable result of good works and a changed life is considered dead and useless for salvation.³⁵

Conclusions Drawn from 2:14-17

In conclusion, this opening section of James argument has shed light on several important key terms. First, James is not speaking about faith in the way that Paul speaks about faith. For when Paul speaks about faith, he is assuming true and saving faith (Gal 2:16, 3:7; Rom 3:22; 4:5, 5:1 et al), but James in the context of James 2 is showing that there is a faith that someone claims to have (James 2:14), but this is not a true or a saving faith. Instead it is a dead faith that is totally ineffectual in regards to salvation. It is likened to empty words of a well wisher who when a poor and destitute brother comes to him in need of food and clothing, he utters the words, “go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and does not give him the things necessary for the body (2:15-16). These words are totally useless and of no profit to the poor and destitute brother. The same is true for a

³⁴ Motyer, J.A, *The Message of James*, ed. John R. W. Stott (Leicester: England: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 109.

³⁵ Blomberg, *James*, 132.

faith that has no works. It is useless in one's relationship toward God and cannot save him. We also saw that the context of James 2 is dealing with eschatological salvation. Therefore, faith if it does not produce works which in time lead inevitably to a changed life, is powerless to save from the eschatological judgment of God.³⁶ So already in the argument of James 2 three very important terms have been defined: faith, works and salvation. There are two kinds of faith, a dead faith and the converse of a dead faith is a living faith that produces works. The works are works that are produced by faith and are post conversion works, which are distinct from Paul's "works of the law," and finally the salvation spoken of in the context of James 2:14 is eschatological deliverance from the judgment of God.³⁷ The terms faith and works will appear again in next section of James 2:18-19.

James 2:18-19: Two Types of False Faith

In this section James will give two types of false faith. First he will explain a type of faith that is separate from works and secondly he will explain a type of faith that is solely based on creed and is also separate from good works. The text reads, Ἄλλ' ἐρεῖ τις, Σὺ πίστιν ἔχεις, κἀγὼ ἔργα ἔχω· δεῖξόν μοι τὴν πίστιν σου χωρὶς τῶν ἔργων,

³⁶ Although the writer is convinced that one of James' main points is that a true faith will inevitably lead to a change in lifestyle, pastorally one must protect from the doctrine of sinless perfection as this is not at all what James has in mind. To say that faith will inevitably lead to fruit (Gal 5:22-23) or good works is far different from saying that if someone is saved they will never sin. This is contradictory to other clear passages in scripture which state otherwise (cf. 1 John 1:8-10). Also pastorally speaking it is also important to acknowledge that although those who have a true faith will go on to sanctification, they will continually have a struggle with sin (Rom 7:14- 25; Gal 5:17) and as a result Christians are told to make war with sin and mortify sin by the agency of the Holy Spirit (Col 3:5; Rom 8:13).

³⁷ Moo, *The Letter of James*, 100-101.

κἀγώ σοι δείξω ἐκ τῶν ἔργων μου τὴν πίστιν, But some will say you have faith, and I have works, show to me your faith apart from your works and I will show to you my faith by my works. There is a much debate as to who is the interlocutor in this passage, how far does the quotations extend and what position is the interlocutor adopting. Martin Dibelius thinks that this is one of the hardest New Testament passages to interpret for all of the above reasons.³⁸ There are three general positions on who the interlocutor is and what the interlocutor is arguing. The first view is that the interlocutor is an *ally* of James' position of faith and works. A paraphrase given Moo will suffice to demonstrate this view. "You [the false believer of the illustration] say that you have faith; and I have works. But you cannot show me your faith because you do not have works; I on the other hand, can show you my faith by my works."³⁹ This view has the obvious problem of taking into account the strong adversative (Ἀλλ') which gives the impression that the interlocutor is an objector to James rather than an ally. Also someone (τις) seems to refer to the person in verse 14 to who says that they have faith and do not have works, as well as the same person who in verse 20 is called a foolish man who does not seem to believe that faith without works is dead.⁴⁰ The last objection to this view is that in biblical literature where the ancient diatribe style is used the interlocutor is usually an adversary of the view that the author is proposing and not an ally of the argument being advanced by the author. For these reason view one should be rejected. View two says that the

³⁸ Dibelius, *James*, 154.

³⁹ Moo, *Letter of James*, 126.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

person whom James quoting is casting doubt on the truth of James' faith. The interlocutor says, "do you have faith?" and James responds, "I have works. Show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works." Although this view seems somewhat convincing, but the context shows that James is not trying to prove his own faith, but he trying to challenge the validity of a faith that does not produce works.

Probably the most crucial problem with this view is the conjunction $\kappa\acute{\alpha}\gamma\omega$ between "you have faith" and "I have works", which makes this view unlikely.⁴¹ The third view which is the most likely one is that the interlocutor is not setting his faith as opposed to James' faith but he is using the "you" and "I" for two different people. James argument shows that the person who only has faith cannot demonstrate his faith without works, while the person who has works can demonstrate his faith by his works. C. Ryan Jenkins thinks that this question of the James to his interlocutor is the key to understanding James 2:24-26. He states,

This question (and James's response) presents the reader with the interpretive key to James 2:14-26. James realized that the only way to demonstrate or prove one's faith conclusively is through the presence of works, and so he responded that he would show his faith (before God and people) to be a true faith *by his works* (v. 18).⁴²

Therefore James is reacting against the false notion that faith and works are separable. Rather James insists that faith and works are inseparable and faith will always be accompanied by works, if it is true faith.⁴³

The remainder of verse 18 is key in understanding James' point about faith and

⁴¹ McCartney, *James*, 160.

⁴² Jenkins, *Faith and Works*, 69.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

works. Faith is invisible and cannot be seen except by works. That is why James stresses the word show (δείξόν) in verse 18. James says to the interlocutor, “show me your faith and I will show you my faith by my works.” The idea is that faith cannot be seen but it can only be shown and demonstrated by works. Thus for James works are the evidence of a true faith. A false faith is a faith that is separated from works or has no works to demonstrate its validity. This is rather a dead faith that goes back to James’ initial point that faith without works is dead (2:14-17).

In verse 19 one observes another type of false faith. This is a faith that is solely based on a creed and is also separate from works. James says, “You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!” James now addresses his interlocutor from verse 18a. This is a reference to the Old Testament Shema, “Hear, O, Israel the Lord our God is one (Deut 6:4).” James is not reacting against the propriety of sound theological orthodoxy for he actually tells the objector, “you do well”.⁴⁴ James is not saying that faith properly understood cannot save, as this would be direct contradiction to Pauline teaching. But James is merely stating one’s confession of faith or one’s adherence to a certain set of orthodox doctrines does not necessarily save them (cf. 2:14). James could be mocking them for the shallowness of their faith and explaining that good doctrine alone is not sufficient to save. James follows up his point by saying that

⁴⁴ Robert B. Rakestraw, "James 2:14-26: Does James Contradict the Pauline Soteriology," *Criswell Theological Review* 1 (Fall 1986): 36. There is some debate over the phrase “you do well” as to if James is speaking sarcastically or not. Blomberg thinks that the phrase “you do well” is dripping with biting sarcasm. Blomberg, *James*, 134. Ropes thinks that there may be a slight touch of irony in James’ language “you do well.” Ropes, James H, *The Epistle of St. James*, ed. Plummer Alfred and Francis Brown (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1968), 216. Moo is undecided if James is using sarcasm. He says, “James may want us to read a bit of sarcasm in his reply... But James may also intend it as a straightforward commendation.” Moo, *James*, 130.

even the demons believe and they tremble. Even Satan and his minions are as orthodox in their conception of God, but the demons are not saved. Therefore the demons being among the most orthodox theologians perfectly illustrate the emptiness of a verbal confession void of any type of works produced by faith. There seems to be a faith in the book of James that does not save and it is the very same faith that demons have or faith without works. Thus James 2:18-19, with its two examples of false faith serve to illustrate the point that James made in 2:14, 17 that faith without works is dead.

The text says that the demons believe and tremble. The trembling refers to the fear which stands in contrast to the peace of salvation. And a faith which brings about only this type of fear is a barren faith.⁴⁵ The word for tremble (φρίσσοισιν) is used only one time in the New Testament and it refers to an uncontainable, uncontrollable, violent, shaking from extreme fright type of fear. Why this verb is used is another minor exegetical debate. Some do not think that this word adds any importance to James's argument and it is just an add on to the sentence. The New International Version rendering of this verb by setting it off from the sentence by a dash demonstrates this view. Others say that James is using a bit of irony here. He is saying that at least the demons have some sort of reaction to their faith, albeit extreme fear, while people who have a faith without works display no reaction at all to their faith. The word φρίσσοισιν, (tremble) was also used in Philo of the terror that sinners felt who knew that they were deserving of judgment to come, therefore James might also be showing that demons are rightly terrified of their impending judgment and so should humans be as well who have

⁴⁵ Ropes, *St. James*, 216.

a faith without works.⁴⁶

Now that the exegesis of these two sections have been covered, it is helpful to review the major themes that James has developed thus far. Up until this point James main emphasis seems to be the inability of a faith without works to save. James has given one illustration and two examples of a faith that does not produce works and therefore powerless to save. He first gave the illustration of a brother or sister who is in need and the other brothers do not give to him the things that he needs for the body (2:15-16). This illustration is analogous to a faith without works (2:17). A faith without works will not profit in regards to salvation, just as in the illustration, the benediction of the well wishers was of no profit to the needy brother. Then 2:18-19 demonstrate two other example of false faith. There is a faith that is without works and therefore impossible to demonstrate. As far as James is concerned it is a dead faith because it does not have works. There is also a faith that demons have who believe orthodox doctrine but their faith is only shallow commitment to a creed. All of these types of faith cannot save. All of these types of faith are void of works and powerless to save.

Two Illustrations of Genuine Faith: The Example of Abraham and Rahab

This is the final section of the pericope and James will give two examples of genuine faith. This is a critical section because it brings the argument to conclusion and this is the section that is usually found to be most contradictory to Paul (2:21, 24, 25). In this section particular attention will be given to the word δίκαιόω, to justify as this word is crucial to understanding James meaning in this passage.

Verse 20 draws to conclusion the previous section (2:18-19) and transitions

⁴⁶ Moo, *James*, 131.

into the new section, about the examples of Abraham and Rahab. The NIV shows a paragraph break at this verse, which demonstrates rightly that this verse, goes more with what follows than what, proceeds. But it does serve as a transition in the stage of James argument to introduce, two Old Testament examples of genuine faith. In verse 20 James continues his dialogue with the interlocutor and addresses him as a foolish man. James says, *ἐλεις δὲ γινῶναι, ὦ ἄνθρωπε κενέ ὅτι ἡ πίστις χωρὶς τῶν ἔργων ἀργή ἐστιν;* , “do you want to know ‘O’ foolish man that faith without works is dead.” The man who is considered foolish is the man who thinks that true faith can exist apart from works (2:18). BDAG defines the word “foolish” as “pertaining to being void of intellectual, moral and spiritual value.”⁴⁷ This connotes that this man has a lack of understanding, and this lack of understanding has its basis in some kind of moral failure. James asks this foolish man if he wants to know that faith without works is useless. The *ὅτι* sets up the direct object clause and gives the sense of James asking the foolish man what further evidence he needs to understand that faith without works is useless. There is a clever play on words in this verse between the two words *τῶν ἔργων*- “works or deeds’ and *ἀργή*- “not working” (Jesus uses *ἀργή* of the workers who were not working and idle in Matthew 20:3, 6). James is saying that the faith without works does not work or is ineffectual to save. As Moo puts it, a faith that does not work, does not work.⁴⁸ This has been James’s point in the entire passage and this takes us back to James’s thesis that faith without

⁴⁷ BDAG, s.v. “κενός.”

⁴⁸ Moo, *James*, 132.

works is dead (2:14, 17) which he will repeat again when he sums up his argument in 2:26.

The Faith of Abraham

A brief outline of the section follows: verses 21-23 gives the example of Abraham, verse 24 draws upon this example and brings out a logical deduction that Abraham was justified by works, verse 25 gives another example of Rahab to support the deduction that James has made in verse 24 (that man is justified by works) and lastly in verse 26, James will sum up his argument by drawing an analogy that just as the body apart from the spirit is dead so also a faith that has not works is also dead. This ending makes for a nice inclusio and a great way to sum up the argument once again driving home the thesis that faith without works is dead. Returning now to the example of Abraham (vv. 21-23), there are several issues that need to be addressed. First what does James mean by the term “justify.” Secondly what does James mean by the phrase that Abraham’s faith was working together with his works and his faith was perfected and thirdly, what is meant by the phrase, “the scripture was fulfilled” in relation to Genesis 15:6.

The Meaning of the Term δικαιώω in James

Verse 21 starts the beginning of a section that contains the term δικαιώω (3:21, 24, 25). Depending on how one renders the term there are two major lines of interpretation. The term as used by Paul refers to denote a forensic and kingly act in which God declares sinners to be righteous and in a right standing with himself in a new world order.⁴⁹ The emphasis in Paul is definitely on a forensic and legal declaration in

⁴⁹ Martin, *James*, 91. Blomberg essentially says the same when describing

which sinners come into a right standing with God. If James uses the term in the same way as Paul then we are forced to say that there is a contradiction between James and Paul in a very fundamental point in theology.⁵⁰ James asks another rhetorical question which expects a positive answer using the negative particle οὐκ. He asks, was not Abraham our father justified by works, having offered up his son Isaac on the altar? The answer that is demanded by this rhetorical question is yes Abraham was justified by works when he offered up his son on the altar. As was stated above this presents a serious discrepancy between Paul and James. As a result of this fact there have emerged several different streams of interpretation of James 2:21.

The first view which is advocated by Dr. Moo is to understand the word δικαίω to mean to vindicate in the final judgment. Moo argues that the word is used forty-four times in the LXX and most of these times it refers to a vindication based on one's actual conduct. Moo quotes Micah 6:11 when the Lord says that he will not vindicate (δικαίω) “a man with dishonest scales.” Moo says,

The general thrust of the OT, therefore, is that men are declared to be in the right (based) on the facts, i.e. because in general or in a specific matter they are upright, and innocent. And this declaration is naturally closely related to the final judgment (Isa. 43:9; 45:25; 50:8; 53:11).⁵¹

Therefore Moo's final assessment is that the word justification means,

...the ultimate vindication of the believer in the judgment is based on, or at least takes into account, the things that person has done. So “justify” in Paul refers to how a person gets into a relationship with God, while in James it connotes what that

Paul's use of the term. He says, “Paul uses ‘justify’ (Gk. Δικαίω) to denote God's initial judicial verdict of ‘innocence’ pronounced over the sinner who trusts Jesus Christ by faith. Moo, *James*, 133-4.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 134.

relationship must ultimately look like to receive God's final approval.⁵²

Moo gives several other lines of evidence for his position. He says that in the teaching of Jesus one can see that he uses the word, δικαίω, to mean to acquit based on one's actual deeds. In Matthew 12:37 Jesus says, "For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." Also Moo says that righteousness which has the same root as the word justify, in a Jewish context means "correct conduct, as defined by God's law, and the verdict of justification was pronounced over those who faithfully observed the covenant stipulations."⁵³ So there is strong support for δικαίω to denote vindication based on what one has actually done and Moo also argues for this to be an eschatological vindication. But is this the best way to understand the word in the context of James 2?

The other way to understand the word is that it means, "to demonstrate to be right." There is also support for this rendering in the gospels. Jesus says in Matt 11:19, "Wisdom is justified (demonstrated to be right) by her actions." Therefore the basic meaning is that wisdom demonstrates itself to be genuine wisdom by its actions. Another scripture where the δικαίω means to demonstrate to be righteous is Luke 16:15. Jesus said to the Pharisees, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God." Here Jesus is saying that Pharisees were engaged in demonstrating their own righteousness before others by their deeds, they were not going around giving legal declarations about themselves.⁵⁴ Therefore it would seem that the term does not have to

⁵² Ibid., 134-5.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: England: Inter-Varsity

always denote a forensic sense and sometimes it carries a demonstrative sense depending on the context in which it is used. Another example of *δικαιόω*, having a demonstrative sense is Paul's quotation of Psalm 51:4 in Romans 3:4, "...that you may be justified in your words and overcome them when you are judged." This means that God is *shown to be righteous* by his words. Other scriptures that give *δικαιόω*, a demonstrative sense include Genesis 22:16; Luke 7:35; 10:29; 16:15; 1 Timothy 3:16. Ryan C. Jenkins sums up the evidence well when he says,

When it is used in this sense, it means to demonstrate the truth or rightness of a claim... Since both senses of *δικαιόω* are established uses (a forensic justification and a vindication of a claim), Bible students must rely on the context to ascertain which meaning the biblical author intended.

It is the present author's contention that the term should be taken in its demonstrative sense. This means that Abraham was shown to be righteous by works, when he offered up his son Isaac upon the altar. Abraham was already declared righteous by God many years previously to this action as seen in Gen 15:6, and his subsequent works proved or demonstrated the righteousness that he had previously attained by faith alone. This meaning fits the context of James' argument as well since his primary theme has been faith without works is dead. Thus true faith will evidence itself in works and these works demonstrate or show that one has already been declared to be righteous. It is also apparent that both views: shown to be righteous by works or vindication at the final judgment by works are very close in meaning. The major difference is that one is eschatological while the second view means that Abraham was shown to be righteous in history when he offered up his son on the altar and not at the judgment. Blomberg asserts,

James 2:21, 24, and 25 are the only verses in James that contain the forms of the verb "justify" (*δικαιόω*); in each case, the term means to "show to be righteous".

Press, 1994), 731.

Thus both Abraham and Rahab were shown in history, to be righteous by their actions, giving proof fo their prior spiritual state (Gen 22:12, with its “now I know”).⁵⁵

It should also be noted that the adverbial participle “having offered” (ἀνενέγκας) could possibly be taken in three ways, instrumental, causal or temporal. Probably the best rendering is causal which would mean that Abraham was shown to be righteous by works, because he offered up Isaac his son on the altar.

Abraham’s Faith Working Together with his Works

James says that Abraham faith was working together with his works and his faith was brought to maturity by his works. The verb συνήργει is imperfect which means that the faith was continually working with his works. The verb συνήργει, means to work together with, assist, help.⁵⁶ Therefore Abraham’s faith was working together with his works which according to Blomberg means that faith was working itself out in daily life and faith was expressing itself in ongoing sanctification.⁵⁷ Therefore since faith continually works itself out by works, Abraham’s offering up of Isaac was but one of the works that demonstrated Abraham’s faith. The offering up of Isaac on the altar is great example of faith working together with works or what might be call a working faith. Again James is showing a positive example of a living and working faith as opposed to a dead faith that is powerless to save (2:14).

James says that faith was brought forth to maturity by works. So in the

⁵⁵ Blomberg, *James*, 136.

⁵⁶ BDAG s.v. συνεργέω

⁵⁷ Blomberg, *James* 137.

example of Abraham his faith was fully matured by his works. This recalls the *τελειόω* verb that was first introduced in 1:4 which means maturity or completion. Abraham's faith was brought to maturity and fully "grew up" as it was brought to its intended goal, a full confidence in the trust worthiness of God.⁵⁸

The Scripture Fulfilled

In verse 23 we read, And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "*Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.*" And he was called the friend of God. The scripture that James says is fulfilled is Genesis 15:6. But how is it fulfilled with Abraham's offering up of Isaac on the altar? To answer this question one needs to understand that all that Abraham's faith had been led to maturity and when he offered up Isaac on the altar he was demonstrating that he was truly righteous. The righteousness that God credited to Abraham by faith many years previously is now worked out and can be made visible to the entire world. Remember James emphasis on showing (*δείξω*) one's faith by works. In Genesis 22 Abraham has demonstrated or shown his faith through righteousness and the scripture is fulfilled that it was credited to him as righteousness. Thus even though initially we are credited or imputed with righteousness (Rom 4:6) that righteousness is worked out by faith and a believer becomes what God has declared him to be, righteous.

Another result of Abraham's faith working together with his works is that he is called a friend of God. This phrase is no where found in the Bible but James most likely picked it up from Jewish tradition. Abraham is referred to in the Bible as beloved (2 Chronicles 20:7; Isa 41:8; 51:12). This is the opposite of James's friendship with the

⁵⁸ Ibid.

world in enmity to God and whoever makes himself a friend of the world constitutes himself as an enemy of God. Abraham's faith and subsequent obedience shows himself to be friend of God.

Verse 24 sums up James' s argument of the necessity of works to demonstrate faith. It has already been shown that "to justify" means shown to be righteous. Thus we would translate this passages as follows: "You see that a man is shown to be righteous by works and not by faith alone." James continues his dialogue with the interlocutor and brings his dialogue to a conclusion. Faith alone is inadequate to demonstrate or to prove someone as righteous. If one is going to be shown to be righteous works are necessary. If we understand the word "justify" to mean "show to be righteous", this fits the context of James chapter 2 better than any other view and it is parallel to the idea that faith without works is dead. Not to mention that it also falls right in line with Paul's theology.

The Faith of Rahab

James adds one more example to bolster his claim that justification is by works. He says, Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent *them* out another way? The phrase likewise shows that James is bringing further proof of justification by works. As Abraham is an example of justification by works so is Rahab when she received the messengers and sent them out another way. Her faith was also working together with her works and her faith was made mature. She also showed herself to be righteous and a lover of God when she sent the messengers of Israel a different way and thereby demonstrating her loyalty to YHVH. She did this by first hiding the spies from the king, putting them up in her house. She probably risked her own life because of her loyalty to Israel's God. She eventually would

help them escape by lowering them from a rope from the roof of the house. Why did she do this? She did these works because she believed Israel's God. Joshua chapter 2:8-11 demonstrates her faith.

Now before they lay down, she came up to them on the roof,⁹ and said to the men: "I know that the LORD has given you the land, that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land are fainthearted because of you.¹⁰ For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who *were* on the other side of the Jordan, Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed.¹¹ And as soon as we heard *these things*, our hearts melted; neither did there remain any more courage in anyone because of you, for the LORD your God, He *is* God in heaven above and on earth beneath.

The other ironic thing about her is that she was a prostitute, which shows that God justifies people by faith (in the Pauline sense of the word "justify") and then he changes them to demonstrate that faith (in the James 2 sense of the word). Even a harlot can demonstrate herself to be righteous by works which are produced by faith.

James ends the pericope how he began with a statement about faith without works is dead. He compares this dead faith to a corpse that does not have the spirit. It is a dead corpse and good for nothing. James would say that the same is true with faith. If faith does not have works it is good for nothing because it is dead. So James has effectively answered the question he began in chapter 2:14, "What *does it* profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?" The answer is a resounding no. But James has shown us that there is a faith that does save. It is a faith that demonstrates itself by works. Thus as the reformers said, "faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is never alone."

Conclusion

James 2:14-16 has presented some very serious and interesting challenges. When the

passage is thoroughly examined it can be seen to complement Paul fully. Paul and James would have agreed to these same theological truths and of the necessity of saving faith to produce works. This teaching goes all the way back to Jesus Christ, who said,

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. "I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing (John 15:4-5).

Thus James has made a very important and necessary contribution to biblical theology. He confronts the easy believes that is so prevalent in our day. He shows that someone who names the name of Christ must depart from inequity (2 Tim 2:19) and thereby demonstrate that he has been declared righteous by a Holy God.

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