

James as a Sermon on the Trials of Abraham

Summary

The writings alluded to in this epistle suggests that the author and probably its recipients were Hellenistic Jews who were familiar with the re-tellings of biblical stories as preserved in Jubilees and related Jewish Hellenistic literature. When this epistle is read with the background of this literature, it appears to be a sermon based on the Trials of Abraham (a widely known series of stories in 1st century Judaism) with the over-arching message that faith should be evidenced during this lifetime by good works.

Introduction

James appears to be a collection of short treatises concerning a handful of themes,¹ though there have been several attempts to find a single over-arching structure. Some, like Davids,² construct careful schemes where individual themes run in parallel occasionally interacting with each other, while other like Moo³ content themselves with identifying repeated themes. The most successful attempts at identifying an overall structure are probably Wall, who find three neat points ('Quick to Hear' 1.22—2.26, Slow to Speak 3.1-18, Slow to Anger 4.1—5.6)⁴ or Cabaniss who thinks that James addressed different strata in the church (Bishops 1.2-27, Deacons 2.1-26,

¹ Luther accused James of "throwing things together... chaotically" ("Preface to the New Testament", 1522, *Luther's Works* 33 p397 which is also reflected in Martin Dibelius' commentary (*James: a commentary on the Epistle of James*, Hermeneia - a critical and historical commentary on the Bible; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976) which regards James as a series of loosely connected paraenetic passages, though he regards this lack of structure as one of the characteristics of paraenetic discourse (pp.4-11).

² Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: a commentary on the Greek text*, The New international Greek Testament commentary (Exeter: Paternoster, 1982) pp.25-30.

³ Douglas J. Moo, *The letter of James: an introduction and commentary*, The Tyndale New Testament commentaries, 16 (Grand Rapids; Leicester: Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1985) pp.43-46. E. Fry, E. also traces a number of different themes which he plots on a graph to uncover a complex (and improbable) pattern – see "The Testing of Faith. A Study of the Structure of the Book of James" (Bible Translator 29, 1978, 427-35).

⁴ Wall, Robert W., "The intertextuality of scripture: the example of Rahab (James 2:25)" in Flint, Peter W. *The Bible at Qumran: Text, shape and interpretation*, Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) p. 217-236.

Teachers 3.1-18, widows 4.1-10, penitents 4.11—5.12, and the faithful 5.13-20).⁵ Forbes suggested that the epistle was written in two halves to be read out loud in two sessions because themes are repeated⁶ while Gertner linked various themes to Psalm 12 by means of midrashic techniques.⁷ Johnson, who has a useful analysis of these and other attempts at finding a structure, concludes that the best one can hope to find is “an important organizing (and selecting) principle” which “undergirds the inclusion and shaping of James material”,⁸ and this principle is the opposition of friendship with the world and friendship with God.⁹

All these attempts to discover the structure of James imply that James’ audience¹⁰ was at least as clever as the scholar who discovered it. This paper will attempt to find a structure which would have been easily identified by a first century Jewish audience without any special skills or knowledge, except that which would have been picked up at Sabbath school and regular listening to sermons.

James as a Hellenistic Jew

One of the surprising finding of historico-literary studies of James is the huge influence on this epistle of Hellenistic literature of various types (Wisdom literature, retold Bible stories and perhaps even secular Greek literature¹¹) and the relatively good Greek style in which this epistle is written. These findings are surprising because church tradition says the author of this epistle is James the brother of Jesus, who was pictured by tradition as the most Jewish of all the church leaders.

His relatively good Greek style is not a problem, because the recent work at Sepphoris and other sites in Galilee have reinforced the conclusions from literary studies that Greek language and culture were fully integrated into Palestine, especially in

⁵ Cabaniss, A., "A Note on Jacob's Homily" (*EvQ* 47, 1975, 219-22).

⁶ Forbes, P.B.R., "The Structure of the Epistle of James" (*EvQ* 44, 1972, 147-53)

⁷ M. Gertner, "Midrashim in the New Testament" *J. Semitic Studies* 7, 1962, 267-292. Johnson also thinks that it may be based on a single passage (Lev.19) – see his "Friendship with the World".

⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The letter of James: A new translation with introduction and commentary*, The Anchor Bible, no. 37A (New York: Doubleday, 1995) pp. 11-15; quotation from p. 14

⁹ "Friendship with the World/ Friendship with God: A Study of Discipleship in James" in *Discipleship in the New Testament*, ed. F.F. Segovia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

¹⁰ The people whom James is addressing will be called his 'audience' both because it is likely that this epistle was developed from a sermon, and because it was intended to be read out publicly.

¹¹ See the detailed analysis in Johnson, *The letter of James*. He finds parallels in Greco-Roman Moralists (pp.27-29) and Hellenistic Jewish literature (pp. 34-46) with the most significant similarities in the language of Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides (p.40), though Johnson thinks that the similarities with Testament of Twelve Patriarchs is even stronger (pp.43-45).

Galilee.¹² It would be unthinkable that James, or his brother Jesus, would be ignorant of Greek. If they had any interest in the world around them, they would have a good knowledge of the Greek language and, if they wished, they had access to the whole world of Greek literature. But is it possible that this James would allude to Hellenistic Jewish works like Testament of Twelve Patriarchs or use the same thought forms as the Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides?¹³

Moo pointed out that the traditional picture of James is based mainly on Hegesippus in the early 2nd century who wanted to describe him as an ultra-orthodox Jew in order to appeal to extreme Jewish-Christian groups.¹⁴ The New Testament picture is much more muted, suggesting that although he represented the Jewish believers, he worked in a church which included Hellenistic leaders with Greek names (Act.6.5), and he cited the Septuagint when addressing the Jerusalem Council (Act.15.17f). Therefore the NT picture of James is much more Hellenistic than the later church representation.

This paper will not come to any conclusion about the authorship of the Epistle, and will simply refer to him as "James". However, it is worth noting that the Hellenistic Jewish character of this epistle does not rule out James the brother of Jesus as its author. Neither will this paper deal with the much-debated relationship between this epistle and the epistles of Paul. The main purpose of this paper is to discover the sub-text of the epistle which would have been in the minds of an average Hellenistic Jewish audience in the first century.

Abraham's Faith and Works in Jubilees

Abraham was, for both Paul and James, the perfect illustration of faith and works. For James, Abraham demonstrated that works were not only a demonstration of faith but they could even be regarded as a proof, because Abraham's faith in Genesis 15.6 was traditionally seen as verified by ten Trials, the last of which was the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22.¹⁵ Bauckham lists a multitude of Jewish texts which link Genesis 22 to Abraham's faith,¹⁶ though for James the most significant of these texts is Jubilees because this not only emphasises the concept of faith, but also contains several other details which James alludes to throughout his epistle.

Jubilees originated in the 1st or 2nd century BCE probably in Palestine and was particularly popular among Jews of the 1st and 2nd century CE – as evidenced by the fragments from 15 separate copies spread over five caves at Qumran (in the original Hebrew), and its translation into Greek (though only a very few fragments survive). It

¹² Johnson, *The letter of James* p. 117

¹³ Johnson, *The letter of James* pp. 43, 40

¹⁴ Moo pp.16f

¹⁵ Richard Longenecker found themes from the Trials of Abraham in several NT epistles – see "Faith of Abraham" theme in Paul, James and Hebrews: a study in the circumstantial nature of New Testament teaching (*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20, 1977, p. 203-212).

¹⁶ Richard Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, disciple of Jesus the sage*, New Testament Readings (London: Routledge, 1999) p.122f.

remained popular and was translated into Latin, Syriac and Ethiopic (which is the only version in which the whole text has survived). It is cited in the Damascus Document (CD.16.2-5) and it may be a source for the Genesis Apocryphon.¹⁷

Jubilees consists largely of a retelling of the stories of Genesis and Exodus by an angel to Moses during his forty days on Mt. Sinai. This retelling summarises some events, expands others and inserts a few events which are not found in the Torah. In some places Jubilees is content simply to paraphrase Genesis, such as its first reference to Abraham's faith:

He believed the Lord and it was counted for him as righteousness. (Jub.14.6f
// Gen.15.6)¹⁸

The concept of Abraham's faith is very important to the author of Jubilees because he inserts another reference to it which is not found in Genesis:

Abram rejoiced and he told all of these things to Sarai, his wife. And he believed that he would have seed. (Jub.14.21f – inserted between the account of Genesis 15 & 16)¹⁹

A very large insertion of non-Biblical material in Jubilees occurs just before the Trial concerning Isaac, and this too concentrates on Abraham's faith:

Words came in heaven concerning Abraham that he was faithful in everything which was told him and he loved the Lord and was faithful in all affliction. And Prince Mastema [the lord of evil spirits, cf. Jub.10.7f] came and he said before God, "Behold, Abraham loves Isaac, his son. And he is more pleased with him than everything. Tell him to offer him (as) a burnt offering upon the altar. And you will see whether he will do this thing. And you will know whether he is faithful in everything in which you test him."

And the Lord was aware that Abraham was faithful in all of his afflictions because he tested him with his land, and with famine. And he tested him with the wealth of kings. And he tested him again with his wife, when she was taken (from him), and with circumcision. And he tested him with Ishmael and with Hagar, his maidservant, when he sent them away. And in everything in which he tested him, he was found faithful. And his soul was not impatient. And he was not slow to act because he was faithful and a lover of the Lord. (Jub.17.15-18)

¹⁷ According to J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Genesis Apocryphon of Qumran Cave 1: A Commentary*. (Biblica et Orientalia 18A; Rom, 1966) p.14. However, they may also have used similar common sources.

¹⁸ This and other quotes from Jubilees comes from O.S. Wintermute's translation of the Ethiopic text in J.H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York: Doubleday, 1985) vol.2 35-142. They have been checked against the translations of R.H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English, with introductions and critical and explanatory notes to the several books* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913). Differences are noted when they are significant.

¹⁹ It is interesting to see that Paul also regarded belief in Sarah's pregnancy as a key aspect of Abraham's faith (Rom.4.17-20)

The tenth trial of Abraham's faith came when Sarah died, where Jubilees adds that this was a Trial of Abraham's "patience" or "self-control":²⁰

And Abraham went to weep for her and bury her. And we were testing him whether he would exercise self-control. And he was not impatient with the words of his mouth and he was found self-controlled in this also and he was not filled with anxiety because with the self-control of his spirit he spoke with the sons of Heth [Gen.23.3]...

This is the tenth trial with which Abraham was tried. He was found faithful, controlled of spirit. (Jub.19.3f, 8f).

Abraham, as a result of these tests, was a model of good works. At the end of his life Jubilees adds a touching funeral scene which includes the tribute that:

Abraham was perfect in all of his works with the Lord, and was pleasing through righteousness all the days of his life. (Jub.23.10)²¹

These portions of Jubilees have not survived among the Qumran fragments in the original Hebrew, so the nearest we have is the Ethiopic translation of a Greek translation. The exact wording is therefore lost, but the emphasis on "faith" in Jubilees is clear. The material which is additional to Genesis is very interesting in that it contains both a reference to faith as mental assent ("he believed that he would have seed"), and to faith as verified by works (testing whether he would "do this command" as well as the conclusion that he was "perfect in all his works"). All this is ideal for James who wants to show that Abraham's faith in Genesis 15.6 was merely the start of his life of faith which was evidenced through his works.

When James linked Genesis 15 with chapter 22 he was merely following the traditional link which is found throughout Jewish literature.²² In contrast, Paul was being innovative when he pointed out the chronological distance between Abraham being declared 'righteous' (in Gen.15.6 and the first 'work' of circumcision (in Gen.17.10-14). Paul did not deny the value of works, but he brought faith to the fore and said that works *follow* faith (Rom.4.9-12). Paul denied that 'works of the law' had any role in salvation (Rom.4.2-3), though we will see that James also denied this. For James and his audience it was self-evident that believers had faith which was evidenced by works, but James felt that many had neglected the latter, so he used the story of Abraham's Trial concerning Isaac to remind them.

But this was not the only Trial of Abraham which he referred to in this epistle. James only referred to Abraham directly at 2.21-24, which concerns the sacrifice of Isaac, but he spoke about the "works of Abraham" (i.e. more than one "work") by which "his faith was made complete" (2.22) – implying that he was also thinking about other incidents in Abraham's life where an action demonstrated his faith. We will see that James alluded at several points to incidents which are recorded in Jubilees.

²⁰ Charles' translation has "patience" whenever Wintermute translates "self-control".

²¹ The translation "works" comes from Charles. Wintermute translates "actions".

²² Bauckham, *James* 123.

A sermon on the Trials of Abraham

The parallels between James and the section of Jubilees concerning the Trials of Abraham provides the clue that this epistle was a sermon based on this material or something similar to it. As well as those mentioned above, there are other minor parallels,²³ and when these are all considered together they indicate that James and his audience had something *like* Jubilees in mind.²⁴ James could assume that his audience was familiar with the collection of stories about the Trials of Abraham because these were widely known. They are alluded to in many types of Jewish literature including Philo,²⁵ Josephus,²⁶ other Hellenistic works,²⁷ the New Testament,²⁸ and Rabbinic traditions.²⁹ The only full accounts of these stories dating from New Testament times is found in Jubilees,³⁰ though they may have occurred in other literature which has not survived. The wide number of allusions to them suggests that these stories were so well known that it was unnecessary to retell them in most circumstances because the majority of his audience would be very familiar with them.

²³ Various parallels are discussed later in this paper, such as Firstfruits (Jub. 6.21f; 16.13f; 22.1; cf. Jam.1.18), monotheism (Jub.12.1-8, 12-14, 19-21; cf. Jam.2.19), and the theme of the dangers of wealth (Jub.17.17; 13.28f; cf. Jam.5.5).

²⁴ The version of Jubilees which has survived in Ethiopic and in fragments at Qumran was not the only version in the first century, as seen by the citation from “The book of the divisions of the periods according to their Jubilees” in CD 16.4f.

²⁵ Som. 1.194-195

²⁶ Ant. 1.223, 233

²⁷ Judith 8.26-27; Sir.44.19f; 1Macc.2.52

²⁸ Heb.11.17.

²⁹ Pseudo-Philo, who knew about these stories (LAB 40.2, 5) records stories which were better known in Rabbinic Judaism than Hellenistic Judaism - for example, the only lengthy extra-biblical expansion concerning Abraham in *LAB* is the story of surviving the furnace (LAB.6.11-18) which is alluded to very frequently in rabbinic texts but not in Hellenistic literature. There is a second century reference to the “Ten Trials of Abraham in mAb.5.3 and several references in later centuries (e.g. bSan.89b; Ex.R.30.16; Num.R.14.11; 15.12).

³⁰ Pseudo Philo includes only the extra-biblical story of Abraham and the furnace (LAB 6). Josephus concentrates on political details and adds almost nothing to the Biblical text (Ant.7-15 [154-238]). Philo allegorises at great length in *On the Migration of Abraham*, in *On Abraham*, and in various places within *Allegorical Interpretations* and other works, but he is not very interested in stories about his life. The *Testament of Abraham* and *Apocalypse of Abraham* describe Abraham as a famous person who finds out about death and eternity, and therefore cover very little of his life. Rabbinic literature preserves stories in the Genesis Rabbah 39-62 and Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer 26-32, but these are both late compilations which have little overlap with Jubilees.

Most Jews would have known these stories from regular Sabbath preaching, rather than from literature. They did not need to be reminded of them, any more than a modern congregation needs to be told the parable of the Good Samaritan. What *would* make a congregation take notice is any variation in a well known story; so if a preacher said that “a tax collector and a Roman passed by” instead of “a priest and a levite”, the congregation would correctly wonder about the reason for this change. By this method a preacher can give his own emphasis while using a familiar story and we will see that James used this method on a couple of occasions in this epistle.

The epistle opens by saying that the subject is “trials” (1.2-4) and some of his audience might have identified the well-known theme of the ‘Trials of Abraham’ simply from this reference. Their hunch would be confirmed when James turned immediately to the subject of “wisdom” (1.5) for which Abraham was famous³¹ and then to “doubt” (1.6-8) which was the subject of Abraham’s tenth Trial.³² By the time that James says “God tempts no-one”, all of his audience would recognise the allusion to the story of Satan testing Abraham with regard to Isaac.³³ There was no need to tell this story, because a Jewish audience was familiar with this homiletic expansion of Genesis 22, which they had heard in countless sermons. We are fortunate to have a full account of the story in Jubilees, because on other occasions the story is simply alluded to rather than narrated.³⁴ This story was probably popular because it helped to avoid the suggestion that God would demand human sacrifice, by saying that the temptation came from Satan and not from God.

When James alluded to this story, he introduced a variation which would have made a Jewish audience take notice. Instead of referring to a temptation from Satan James said that temptation comes when someone “is lured and enticed by his own desire”. James did not reject the concept of a personal devil (cf. Jam.4.6), and he could not have meant that Abraham was incited by his own desire to sacrifice Isaac, so he could not be attempting to change the story. If he was not changing the story, then he was changing the *application* which the audience would draw from it, by making a startling change in emphasis. But what was his new application?

Without having yet answered this question, James turned the story round. He has already likened believers to Abraham when he was tested, and now he likens believers to Isaac, the product of a promise. God “gave us birth through the word of truth”

³¹ Philo is very interested in Abraham’s wisdom, (e.g. Alleg. 3.87.119, 244; *Cher.*3, 10, 6, 18, 10, 31, 31, 106; *Birth of Abel* 37, 122; *Pros. Cain* 9, 37 etc.). He calls him “wise Abraham” on more than 40 occasions.

³² In Jub.19.3f, the angel said that when Sarah died “we tried him to see if his spirit were patient in this and was not disturbed.” Philo is also interested in Abraham’s unchanging faith and lack of doubt (e.g. *Migr.*9, 44; *Heir* 18, 90; *Abrah.*46, 270; *Alleg.* 3.81.1, 228; *Heir of Divin.* 18, 90 based on Gen.15.6; *Migr* 24, 132 based on Gen.18.23; *Cher.*6, 19; *Quest. Gen.* 3.58; cf. Jam.1.6-8),

³³ ‘Mastema’ in Jubilees 17.15f.

³⁴ This story was not only well known in Jewish Hellenistic circles, from which Jubilees came, but also Aramaic-speaking Judaism – see e.g. a late 3rd century tradition in bSan.89b where “Satan” tests Abraham and 1st century LAB.32.1 where Abraham is told to make the sacrifice because “all the angels were jealous of him”.

(1.18) which is like the promise made to Abraham by the “Father of heavenly lights” (1.17)³⁵ - a promise that he would have a son whose descendants would be as numerous as the stars (Gen.22.17; Jub.18.15). James called Isaac “a kind of firstfruits” (1.18) of all those promised children, so that believers are firstfruits “of all he created” (1.18).

The Festival of Firstfruits is very important in Jubilees, especially in the stories of Abraham who is almost regarded as the patron of this particular festival.³⁶ Firstfruits were very important to Diaspora Jews (to whom this letter is addressed) because these were the only personal offerings which they could send to Jerusalem each year even if they could not attend themselves. Representatives of each town brought a collection of the Firstfruits of their community, often forming a procession led by a sacrificial ox decorated with a crown of leaves between its horns.³⁷ James may be alluding to this popular image when he says that, believers wear a “crown of life” (1.12).

James then introduced one of the major themes in this epistle - controlling the tongue. This theme is found both in Abraham’s Trial concerning Isaac and in his tenth Trial concerning Sarah’s death – two trials which are closely linked in Jubilees.³⁸ When Sarah died, Abraham had to control what he said and speak graciously to the sons of Heth who were employing all the cunning stratagems of oriental haggling to get the best price for her grave. In Jubilees the angel tells Moses that:

“... we were testing him whether he would exercise self-control. And he was not impatient with the words of his mouth (Jub.19.3).

This is similar to the trial concerning Isaac which was a test to show that “his soul was not impatient. And he was not slow to act” (Jub.17.18). This description appears to be contradictory unless the “not impatient” refers to speaking, which is what the Trial concerning Sarah suggests, so we should read “not impatient [to speak] and not slow to act”. He was “not slow to act” because as soon God called, he answered, and when he was told what to do, “he arose while it was still dark” to obey God without saying or asking anything more (Gen.22.3; Jub.18.3). He was “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (Jam.1.19), even when asked to sacrifice his son, and he did not “merely listen to the word” but immediately went to “do what it says” (Jam.1.22).

³⁵ This may be related to the vision of Isaac in the Testament of Abraham 7.5 when he sees “an enormous man, shining exceedingly from heaven, as the light which is called father of light”, which was interpreted as Abraham, who is like the sun.

³⁶ Abraham is described sacrificing firstfruits on several occasions, sometimes in detail (Jub.6.21f; 16.13f; 22.1).

³⁷ mBik.3.2-3. This tradition is likely to originate before 70 CE because it is told from the point of view of priests, rather than the scholars or rabbis who later compiled the Mishnah who are unlikely to have recorded it like this unless they had received it in this form.

³⁸ The two stories are next to each other in Jubilees and they are both concerned with the theme of “patience” - Jub.17.18, “his soul was not impatient” and Jub.19.3, “he was not impatient with the words of his mouth”

After exploring these issues, the epistle leaves the story of Genesis 22 and moves on to criticising the favouritism which was shown to wealthy visitors and the comparative rejection of the poor (Jam.2.1-13). There are no clear allusions to stories of Abraham in this section, though the thoughts of his audience would most likely turn to the story of Abraham's hospitality.

Abraham gave hospitality to three strangers who turned out to be angels in disguise (Gen.18) which made Abraham into an exemplar of hospitality in Judaism.³⁹ Unfortunately this incident is not retold in any early sources,⁴⁰ so we do not now know how the story was preached in 1st century Judaism and it is therefore possible that there are allusions to the story in this section which we cannot recognise. We do know one way in which it was preached because it was used in Hebrews 13.2 to teach hospitality to strangers, which presumably meant 'poor strangers' because no-one needed encouragement to give hospitality to rich strangers. Although it is possible that Hebrews contains a unique application of this story, it is much more likely that the story of Abraham's hospitality was often applied in this way in synagogue teaching. This means that James' audience would have recognised his section on welcoming the poor as well as the rich as an application of the story of Abraham's hospitality. Once this link is made, then James' conclusion that "mercy triumphs over judgement" (Jam.2.13) becomes an allusion to the conclusion of Abraham's prayer for Sodom (which arises from his talk with the angels): "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen.18.25). James said to those who discriminated against the poor that "you have become judges with evil thoughts" (Jam.2.4), as an appeal to them that they should judge like God does.

James then turns to the matter of faith and works, which is at the centre of the story of Abraham's trials, and especially his trial concerning Isaac (Jam.2.14-26), as outlined above. To emphasise that this combination of faith and works did not only apply to Abraham, James adds the example of Rahab "who was considered righteous for what she did" (Jam.2.25). Wall⁴¹ has pointed out that the language used of Rahab has linguistic links to the story of Abraham's hospitality – like a good host she 'lodged them' (*hupo...*) then 'sent them' on their journey (*ekballo*); and her guests are even called 'angels' or 'messengers' (*angelos*). This helps to confirm that James was also alluding to Abraham's hospitality in 2.1-13.

³⁹ Louis Ginzberg, *The legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913-1967) notes *ad loc.* Gen. 18.1. Roy-Bowen Ward, "Works of Abraham: James 2:14-26" (*Harvard-Theological-Review* 61, 1968, 283-290) pp. 286f.

⁴⁰ It is passed over without details in Jubilees, passed over completely in Pseudo-Philo and this section is missing from the fragments of Genesis Apocryphon in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Josephus records only the details found in Genesis, though he adds that they were "angels", that Abraham offered them "entertainment" and that the angels "made a show of eating" (Ant.11.2, XXX).

⁴¹ Wall, Robert W., "The intertextuality of scripture: the example of Rahab (James 2:25)" in *The Bible at Qumran: Text, shape and interpretation, Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) p. 217-236. See also Ward, "Works of Abraham".

Exhortations arising from the theme

All of the themes which are derived from the Trials of Abraham in the first half of James' sermon are applied in very personal and direct ways in the second half. They are stated in personal terms, unlike the first half of the epistle which is almost all in the third person. In chapter 1 James talked about "one who doubts" (1.6), "one who is rich" (1.10), "one who is tempted" (1.13), "one who listens to the word but does not do what it says (1.22) etc. In chapter 2 he talked *to* them, but only hypothetically: "if a man comes in to your synagogue" (2.1), "if you really keep the royal law" (2.8); and then he goes back to the third person, "if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds" (2.14). In the second half everything becomes very personal: "we who teach" (3.1), "we all stumble" (3.2), "with the tongue we praise... or we curse" (3.9), "who is wise and understanding among you?" (3.13), "what causes fights and quarrels among you?" (4.1). The epistle ends with direct personal criticisms and direct calls to repentance: "you adulterous people" (4.4), "submit yourselves to God" (4.7), "do not slander one another" (4.11), "you rich, weep and wail" (5.1), "be patient till the Lord's coming" (5.7).

The exhortatory second half of the sermon is based largely on the themes which were derived in the first half from stories of the Trials of Abraham: self-control of the tongue (3.1-12; cf. 1.19-21); wisdom and humility (3.13—4.10; cf. 1.5-12); slander, favouritism and wealth (4.11—5.6; cf. 2.1-7). Consequently there are few references to Abraham in the second half, except when new sub-themes are introduced – quarrels at 4.1-7 and warnings about riches at 5.1-6.

Quarrels, says James, are evidence that they are spiritually "adulterous", because they practise "friendship with the world" (4.4) and they should "submit to God" instead. James 4.5 apparently contains a citation, though it is impossible to identify, because it does not match anything in the Old Testament or any extra-Biblical texts which have survived.⁴² However, the theme of jealousy is clear in this citation, and the subject God's jealousy due to spiritual adultery is a common theme in the Old Testament prophets, who likened idolatry to adultery and the exile of Israel to a divorce by a jealous husband.⁴³

The theme of spiritual adultery would therefore remind a 1st century Jewish audience about the first Trial of Abraham which concerned his rejection of idols. This extra-Biblical story, which is very important in Jewish literature, is recorded at length in Jubilees which includes a long poetic appeal to Terah, on the lines of an Isaianic complaint about the vanity of idols (Jub.12.2-5), as well as the story of burning the idols of Ur (Jub.12.12-14). The conclusion to this story is Abraham's discovery of monotheism (Jub.12.16-21), which James may be alluding to when James said that even demons believe that "God is one".

⁴² Perhaps this is a reference to a Greek version of Mal.2.15 which is equally difficult to translate from the garbled Hebrew which has survived, but which speaks about a spirit dwelling inside, in the context of marriage break-up. See the analysis of this text in G.P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant. A Study of Biblical Law and Ethics Governing marriage, developed from the perspective of Malachi* (Supp to Vetus Test. 52, 1994) pp.124-132.

⁴³ E.g. Jer.3; Ezek.16 & 23

James' conclusion in 4.7 that one should "submit to God; resist the Devil and he will flee" is similar to a detail from the story of Abraham's circumcision which is found in the Damascus Document where it appears to cite a passage from the book of Jubilees which is not found in any surviving version.⁴⁴ It says that the following was found in "The book of the divisions of the periods according to their Jubilees and their weeks":

"And on the day on which the man has pledged himself to return to the law of Moses, the angel Mastema [the lord of evil angels] will turn aside from following him, should he keep his word. This is why Abraham circumcised himself on the day of his knowledge." (CD 16.4f).⁴⁵

This suggests that at least some versions of Jubilees contained this application to the story of Abraham's circumcision and that his obedience of this precept was regarded as the key to his protection from Satan (Mastema). James' version at 4.7 is clearly different, because he has replaced submission to the Law of Moses with submission to God. This is probably a deliberate variation by which he would capture his audience's attention, like he did at 1.13f where he replaced Satan with human desires. As on that occasion, James does not state his reasons for doing so, at this point in the sermon.

The second new sub-theme, the warnings about riches at 5.1-6, has a tenuous link to Abraham's Trial of Riches of Kings (Jub.17.17). Perhaps James felt that it was not necessary at this stage in the sermon to flag his allusions more clearly, because his audience would be looking out for them. Jubilees does not clearly state what the "Trial of Riches of Kings" was, but it is most likely a reference to the offer by the King of Sodom to keep the war booty in return for the people (Jub.13.28f//Gen.14.21-24). This explains James' otherwise extreme words, "you fattened yourselves in a day of slaughter" (Jam.5.5).

The end and the aim of the sermon

The sermon ends at 5.11, with a final reminder that the Lord's coming is near (5.7-9) and with a return to the opening theme of Abraham's patience in his trials (5.11; cf. 1.2f). He links this theme with the story of Job, which was clearly the model for the story in Jubilees about the debate in heaven concerning the sacrifice of Isaac in (Jub.17.15-18). The final words of the sermon are "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy" so that, like a model sermon of early Judaism, it ends with a word of consolation.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ It is, however, implied in the surviving Ethiopic version, which says that circumcised Israel is protected from spirits which lead other nations astray (15.31f).

⁴⁵ Translation from Florentino Garcia Martínez, *The Dead Sea scrolls translated: the Qumran texts in English* (Leiden: Brill, 1994). It is not clear where the citation from the Book of Jubilees starts or ends, but it almost certainly included the reference to "Mastema" which is the name for the lord of evil spirits in Jubilees (it occurs only here in CD, but 12 times in Jubilees).

⁴⁶ In early Jewish tradition, a sermon should always end with a word of consolation. Joseph Heineman see this as far back as 2Macc.8.23 – see *Prayer in the Talmud: forms and patterns*, English translation (Berlin; New York: de Gruyter, 1977) p. 228.

This ending tells us that the ‘text’ of the sermon was the story of Job. The ‘text’ of a sermon in early Judaism was typically only referred to at the end and sometimes at the beginning, while the main body of a sermon was based on a series of incidents which could be verbally or thematically linked to this text.⁴⁷ Now that the ‘text’ is revealed, we can see the rationale behind the choice of the main themes which he picked out of the Trials of Abraham – they were all themes which are also found in Job: gaining wisdom through trials, the transientness of riches, listening rather than speaking and the danger of the tongue.⁴⁸

The last few verses (5.12-20) are the final exhortations and advice which were added when the sermon became an epistle. This is similar to the final exhortations which are found in other NT epistles.⁴⁹ Although the sermon is over, the themes of Abraham and Job are carried over into this codicil. The teaching on swearing was probably prompted by the Lord saying “I swear by myself...” immediately after the Trial concerning Isaac,⁵⁰ and although Elijah is named as someone who prayed with faith, it was Abraham and not Elijah who prayed for the healing of an illness caused by sin.⁵¹ Job also contains both the themes of swearing⁵² and healing through prayer.⁵³

⁴⁷ This was the typical structure of a sermon of the ‘Proem’ form, which is found frequently in agadic Rabbinic literature – see the introduction by Isaiah Sonne in Jacob Mann’s *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue* (Vol.1, New York: KTAV, 1971; Vol. 2, Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1966). Unfortunately the rabbinic collections which contain these sermons were compiled relatively late, and the individual sermons are almost impossible to date. However it is possible to identify this sermon form in the NT – see John Westerdale Bowker, “Speeches in Acts: a study in proem and yelammedenu form” (*New Testament Studies* 14, 96-111) esp. p. 100.

⁴⁸ Job.1.22: “Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing”.

⁴⁹ Cf. Rom.16.17-20; 1Cor.16.22; 2Cor.13.11. 1Thes.5.12-22; 1Tim.6.17-20; Tit.3.14;

⁵⁰ Gen.22.16; Jub.18.15.

⁵¹ Gen.20.17f. Although the whole incident with Abimelech and Sarah is missing from Jubilees as well as the similar incident of Abimelech and Isaac’s wife (Gen.26.6-11), because the author of Jubilees does not want to record anything negative about Abraham, the previous similar incident concerning Pharaoh and Sarah in Gen.12.10-20 is recorded briefly (Jub.13.13-15) as the test was “when his wife was taken” (Jub.17.17). Other Hellenistic retellings of Abraham’s Trials do mention Abraham’s healing powers with regard to this story, such as a mid-3rd C tradition in Gen.R.39.11 and, more importantly, the fragmentary account in *Genesis Apocryphon* 19-20 which says that Abraham “laid hands” on Pharaoh’s head to heal him which made an evil spirit stop attacking him (20.20, 29). In the *Testament of Abraham* (1st or 2nd C CE) Abraham prays for another soul whose good works are equally balanced by his sins (Test.Abr.A.12.), and his “righteous prayers” result in the soul’s salvation (Test.Abr.A.14 esp. v.8).

⁵² Job.2.9: “curse God and die”.

The aim of the sermon should not be sought so much in the text or the other sources which he has used (which may have been determined by a lectionary or by tradition) but by the ways in which James has *departed* from his sources – themes which were not present in the sources or themes which he has ignored, and variations which he has introduced to the traditional stories. His use of these traditional stories does not mean that he believes in their historicity or puts them on par with Scripture, but he is able to use them as illustrations in a sermon in much the same way as a modern preacher might refer to the life of a saint. The variations which he introduces are not intended to be corrections, but a different emphasis or a different application which stands out simply *because* it is different.

We noted two departures where he varied from the familiar stories: firstly he replaced temptation by Satan with temptation by internal desires (1.13f) and secondly he talked about submission to God instead of submission to the Law (4.7). The first variation would have stood out very obviously to his audience because the story of Satan's request to test God's saint was so well known both in the Trials of Abraham and at the beginning of Job. The second variation may have been less obvious because the tradition it is based on may have less familiar – the circumcision of Abraham is recorded in only one surviving source. James does not spell out the reason for either variation, so presumably the messages he wants to derive from them must be found elsewhere in his sermon.

The second variation involves a de-emphasises of submission to the Law, which concurs with another way in which James departs from his sources – he never speaks about keeping the ceremonial law, whereas Jubilees considers it to be very important. Jubilees tries to show that Abraham obeyed all of that law which was later called the Law of Moses. Abraham paid tithes of everything “to his priests” (Jub.13.25-27), offered his Firstfruits of crops and herds on the correct date (Jub.15.1f; 22.4),⁵⁴ circumcised his household (Jub.15.11-14, 23-34 – an expansive enlargement of the Biblical text), kept the Festival of Booths by building a Booth of branches and making all the correct offerings (16.20-31; 22.1-4), and on his deathbed he gave detailed prescriptions about how to make sacrifices in accordance with Leviticus 3.7-11 which he found written “in the books of my forefathers, and in the words of Enoch and in the words of Noah” (Jub.21.6-10). None of this emphasis is found in James.

James repeatedly reminds his audience about the value of “works”, but the works described and called for by James are all moral good works, in stark contrast to Jubilees which is mainly concerned with what Paul calls “works of the Law”. This makes James' ethical teaching stand out vividly against the background of the sources with which he and his audience were familiar. This is the same contrast which we find

⁵³ In Job 42.9f Job was healed after praying for his friends, like Sarah's barrenness was healed after Abraham prayed for the barrenness caused by taking Sarah (Gen.20.17—21.2).

⁵⁴ Unlike rabbinic Judaism which allowed Firstfruits to be presented any time between the feasts of Weeks and Booths (m.Bik1.3, 10), Jubilees is concerned that they should only be presented on the last day of Weeks.

in Paul, who commented negatively about “works of the Law” but who commented three times as often about the positive value of ‘works’ (i.e. morally good works).⁵⁵

The message implied by the first variation, which de-emphasised Satan, is probably related to this. As pointed out above, James was not trying to change the story, but was presenting a different application of the story. Presumably he was warning his audience against applying the story of Abraham’s Trial in the wrong way – i.e. by concluding that temptations generally come from the Devil. This type of mis-application provides people with an excuse for evil, by saying that ‘the Devil made me do it’. James’ reply to them is that “each one is tempted... by his own evil desire”. He wanted to emphasise that they should make a conscious effort to avoid evil works in the same way that they should strive to do good works.

In conclusion, James’ message is a call to a moral lifestyle – they should do good works and they should not do evil deeds. He illustrated this by the Trials of Abraham in order to emphasise that their faith was on trial, and the evidence presented in this trial is based on their works. This conclusion is confirmed if we collect the direct personal statements and imperatives which are found in the epistle: “do not show favouritism” (2.1); “you have insulted the poor” (2.6); “speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law of freedom” (2.12); “you adulterous people” (4.4); “wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts you double-minded” (4.8); “do not slander” (4.11); “you boast and brag” (4.16); “you rich, weep and wail” (5.1); “be patient... until the Lord’s coming (5.7f).

James’ overall teaching is therefore that believers are tested in this lifetime like Abraham and Job were. Like Abraham and Job, it is not their works which are on trial, but their faith as evidenced by their works.

⁵⁵ Johnson points this out that although Paul refers negatively to ‘works of the Law’ on 17 occasions he speaks positively about ‘works’ (by which he means good works of charity or moral works) on 50 occasions – see details at Johnson, *The letter of James* p. 60. Sometimes even “work(s) of the law” can refer to ethical good works (e.g. Rom.2.15).