

Taming the Tongue: James 3:1–12

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ABSTRACT: This article provides an exegetical insight into James 3:1-12, a text that discusses the topic of taming the tongue. The text encompasses several genres, such as homiletics, wisdom, and parenesis. It has one particular translation issue. It contains several illustrations, mostly from nature. Its literary style is influenced by Jewish wisdom literature, Greco-Roman rhetoric and style, and the sayings of Jesus. The theme of speech appears in other parts of this epistle and connects this text with the broader biblical context of wisdom literature and deuterocanonical wisdom books. With clear, strong, and memorable wording, this text warns readers about the dangers of uncontrolled speech and emphasizes the need to tame the tongue. The purpose of this article is to highlight the profound significance of the message found in James 3:1-12, emphasizing its implications for Christians.

KEYWORDS: James 3:1-12, tongue, speech, exhortation

Introduction

James 3:1-12 holds significant importance within the message of the book of James, as it provides a crucial exhortation for living an authentic Christian life, emphasizing the need to exercise control over our speech. The main theme of the section, as the subtitle in many translations indicates, is “taming the tongue.” It starts with a warning to those who aspire to be teachers in the church, it confesses our sinfulness, and then moves to speech, saying that a perfect man controls his speech and therefore his whole person. The text

then provides several vivid illustrations on taming the tongue and on the dangers of the tongue. The final paragraph exhorts us not to use our tongue for both good and bad, which seems to be the common practice, but only for good. “As is generally the case with James, his meaning is painfully clear: make every effort to keep control of the tongue... for no member of the body has greater capacity for doing harm, in spite of its capacity for doing good” (Brosend 2004, 87).

This text is considered an independent unit because it deals with its own theme, which is different from the preceding text and from the following text. The preceding unit, 2:14–26, is about faith and deeds, and the following unit, 3:13–18, is about wisdom. James 3:1–12 is clearly its own thematic unit about speech. However, it is related to both units that come before and after. It is related to the preceding unit, because real faith is followed by deeds. Therefore, a Christian with real faith will control his tongue. It is related to the following unit because a Christian who controls his tongue shows real wisdom. The purpose of James 3:1–12 is to warn Christians to carefully watch their words and to exhort them to use their words for good. This clearly fits into the overall purpose of the letter, which is “to offer evangelical counsel and pastoral exhortation to believers who might be tempted to compromise their faith through devotion to the world” (Powell 2009, 451).

Main theme

This text is an exhortation to Christians to control their tongue and to use it in the right way. The first exhortation is about Christian teachers. Not many people in the church should be teachers, because they will be judged more strictly. The reason is that their main tool of the trade is their tongue (speech), and this tool is difficult to control. Only those who are perfect in speech (able to control the tongue) should be teachers. The tongue is a small part of the body, and if it is controlled, the whole person is controlled. On the other hand, although small, the tongue is capable of great evils. An uncontrolled tongue can corrupt the whole person and its whole life. It is very difficult for human beings to control the tongue. The final exhortation is to control the tongue in such a way that it is not used for both good and evil, but only for good.

Translation matters

The text does not contain translation issues that would give significant possibilities of different interpretations and meanings, except for verse 3:6, which is difficult in the original Greek. There are also several noticeable differences when reading different translations. In verses 3:1,10,12 Greek word “adelphoi” (“brothers”) is sometimes translated “brothers and sisters” (NRSV) or “fellow believers” (NIV). The reason is that some translations are careful to be inclusive of women, and therefore use gender sensitive language. In James 3:2, the Greek verb “ptaio” literally means “to stumble”, but is sometimes translated “to make mistakes” in translations that aim to be clearer in meaning to the readers. There is a wordplay using this verb. James 3:2 literally states, “Indeed, we all *stumble* in many ways. If anyone *does not stumble* in word...”. Some translations keep the wordplay, and some do not. James 3:6 is a difficult text in the original Greek. “It is true that the general sense of the passage is clear, but scholars have not agreed on the detailed meaning or the structure of the text” (Davids 1982, 141). The Greek phrase “ton trochon tes geneseos” is especially difficult to translate because it literally translates as “the wheel of existence.” Since this phrase does not convey meaning in English, it has to be interpreted. Therefore, most translations state either “the course of life” or “the course of nature.” In verse 3:11, the Greek adjective “pikros” is sometimes translated as “bitter” and sometimes as “salt,” referring to water.

Genre

The text belongs to several genres, such as homiletics, wisdom, and parenthesis. Regarding the homiletic genre, this section reads like a part of a sermon, with its particular theme and rhetorical devices. The text contains exhortations in the form of warnings (“we should not”) and pleadings (“my brothers, this should not be”). It contains general truths (“we all stumble in many ways”), illustrations (horses, ships, forest fires), comparisons (tongue and fire), rhetorical questions, and a purpose. All of these are elements of a sermon. Wisdom literature includes “biblical and other ancient materials that focus on commonsense observations about life” (Powell 2009, 449). The rhetoric of James 3:1–12 employs several commonsense observations and illustrations. Furthermore,

it deals with one of the favorite themes of wisdom literature – speech. It also belongs to a genre called parenetic exhortation or parenesis, which is a phrase “Commonly used as technical term to refer to all general exhortations of an ethical or practical nature” (Schroeder 1976, 643). The text contains many exhortations, which all point to the main one – control the speech.

According to Powell, there are three major traditions that influence the literary style of the letter of James: Jewish wisdom literature, Greco-Roman rhetoric and style, and the sayings of Jesus (Powell 2009, 449). All of these three traditions are represented in James 3:1–12. First, Jewish wisdom books contain folk wisdom statements with examples from nature. Jewish wisdom literature includes canonical wisdom books (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes) and deuterocanonical wisdom books (Ben Sira, also called Sirach or Ecclesiasticus, and the Wisdom of Solomon). Our text contains such statements about the tongue with illustrations from nature (human body, forest fire, springs of water, fruit trees) and human dealings with nature (taming animals, sailing ships on the seas). Second, regarding the Greco-Roman style, Watson argues that James 3:1–12 is “constructed according to a standard elaboration pattern for argumentation discussed by Greco-Roman rhetorical works” (Watson 1993, 48). He offers a detailed syntax analysis of the text and a number of technical terms of Greco-Roman oratory. Furthermore, “James has appropriately been compared to the Greco-Roman diatribe because of its lively, dialogical style, especially in the essays of 2:1–5:20” (Johnson 1998, 178). Diatribe is “a rhetorical device derived from Greek philosophy in which an author argues with an imaginary opponent, proposing objections and then responding to them” (Powell 2009, 449). Third, we can recognize several statements in our text that seem to be based on the sayings of Jesus, since the Epistle of James is filled with them (Powell 2009, 449). However, James never quotes Jesus’s sayings, but integrates them into his own teaching. Those used in James 3:1–12 will be identified in the section on intertextuality.

Broader context (the epistle)

The theme of speech is not found only in James 3:1–12 but throughout the epistle. James issues a number of warnings regarding speech: those who do not control their tongue, and yet consider themselves religious, are deceived and their religion is worthless (1:26); those who speak must be aware of the

coming judgment (2:12); those who slander other Christians are judging them and must stop (4:11–12); those who boast and brag are doing evil (4:13–16); those who grumble against other Christians will soon be judged (5:9); and those who swear by anything will be condemned (5:12). Although our main text has a number of negative facts to say about the tongue, a careful reading of the whole letter reveals many possibilities for proper use of the tongue. James gives advice to be quick to listen and slow to speak (1:19). Those who patiently listen, and think carefully before they speak, are likely to control their tongue. Praying to God is another proper way to use our tongue. James encourages us to pray for wisdom (1:5), to pray when in trouble (5:13), and to pray for each other to be healed (5:16). The elders can pray for the sick, and be sure that their prayer of faith will bring healing (5:14–15). An earnest prayer of a righteous person can be very effective (5:16b–18). Blessing our God (3:9) and singing songs of praise to him (5:13) is an excellent way to use our tongue. Finally, confessing our sins while praying for healing is another good use of the tongue (5:16). In other words, our speech can be a blessing to God, to others and to ourselves.

Intertextuality

The theme of speech is one of the popular themes in the biblical wisdom books. In the Book of Job, despite all of his tremendous troubles, Job “did not sin in what he said” (Job 2:10, NIV). Job himself claimed that there was not any wrong on his tongue (Job 6:30; 27:4). Maybe James could have used Job as an example of a perfect man (James 3:2), but he uses him as an example of patient suffering (James 5:10–11). In several Psalms, wicked people are described as malicious liars (e.g., 5:9), while the righteous people speak what is true and wise (15:2–4; 37:30). The psalmist instructs the children about the importance and consequences of controlling their tongue (34:13) and uses his tongue to praise the Lord (35:28). In the Book of Proverbs alone there are twenty-one sayings that speak about the use of tongue (6:17; 10:19,20; 10:31; 11:12; 12:18,19; 15:2,4; 16:1; 17:4; 17:20,28; 18:21; 21:6; 21:23; 25:15; 25:23; 26:28; 28:23; 31:26, in the NIV). Probably the most popular proverb on speech is the one that states, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits” (18:21, NRSV). Ecclesiastes 10:12–14 describes the progression and the utter evil result of

foolish speech, similar to James' illustration of a spark igniting a fire which consumes everything: "...the lips of fools consume them. The words of their mouths begin in foolishness, and their talk ends in wicked madness; yet fools talk on and on" (NRSV).

The theme of speech is also popular in the deuterocanonical wisdom books, *Ecclesiasticus* and *Wisdom*, which were both available to James. In the book of *Ecclesiasticus* (or *Sirach*) we find several sayings that are similar to what James states in 3:1–12. For example, the person who has not sinned in speech is blessed (14:1), and everyone has sinned in speech (19:16). This is similar to the tension in James 3:2 where he states that we all make mistakes, but if somebody does not make mistakes in speech, he is a perfect man. *Sirach* also states that the tongue brings such a horrible death that Sheol is preferable to it (28:21), while James states that the tongue destroys the person, and "is set on fire by hell" (3:6, NIV), and is "full of deadly poison" (3:8, NIV). The Book of *Wisdom* has only a few things to say about speech, but like James 3:1, it speaks about the judgment related to speech: "For wisdom is a kindly spirit and will not free a blasphemer from the guilt of his words; because God is witness of his inmost feelings, and a true observer of his heart, and a hearer of his tongue" (1:6). Jewish wisdom literature "reveals the specific verbal sins of loquacity, rash utterance, backbiting, gossip, duplicity, slander, and lying" (MacGorman 1986, 31), and the Epistle of James likewise points out many sins of speech. The evidence of these examples shows that James 3:1–12 reflects what Jewish wisdom literature has to say about speech.

As mentioned earlier, the sayings of Jesus also significantly influenced James. What sayings of Jesus can we trace in James 3:1–12, since they are not directly quoted but integrated into the text? In Matthew 15:11, Jesus speaks about a person being defiled by what comes out of his mouth, while in 3:6, James states that the evil speech corrupts the whole person. In Matthew 12:33–37, Jesus speaks about several things that are found in our text in James. He speaks about good trees producing good fruit and bad trees producing bad fruit, about evil speech that comes from evil hearts, about good persons speaking good and bad persons speaking evil, and about being judged for what we say. We find the echoes of judgment regarding speech in James 3:1, echoes of evil speech in 3:6,8, and echoes of things producing according to their nature in 3:9–12. According to Davids, "the teaching of

Jesus provides parallels which may have been in their oral form a basis for James's ideas (Mt. 7:16–20 par. Lk. 6:43–45; cv. Mt. 12:33–35 par. Lk. 6:45)" (Davids 1982, 148). Finally, the text echoes with some images of the creation account in Genesis (Johnson 1998, 205), such as every species of animals and humans being made in the likeness of God.

Theological implications

James 3:1–12 tells important truths about human beings, about Christians, about God, and about the results of the Gospel. Human beings make many mistakes and have great difficulty controlling their tongue. Uncontrolled human speech brings about terrible consequences. Christians also have this problem, but it should not be so. A Christian tongue should only be used for good, such as praising God and blessing people. Furthermore, human beings have been made in God's likeness. Therefore, they are very valuable and should not be cursed. God is identified as the Lord and Father of the Christians. Implicitly, if he is our Lord, we must obey him, and if he is our Father, he has enabled us to be like him, even in the matter of speech. The results of the Gospel should be visible in our speech, because our nature has been changed – God has made us like springs of fresh water and like trees that produce good fruit. God's expectation of us is both explicit – we must not be double-tongued, and implicit – since Jesus Christ has cleansed us of our sins, and set us free from the power of sin over us, we must be careful to control our tongue and use it for good.

Conclusion

The language and message of James 3:1–12 are clear, memorable, and strong. Taming of the tongue is his theme, power of the tongue is his warning, control of the tongue is his purpose, and natural phenomena are his illustrations. "Christianity is a religion of the word... Learning to control the tongue was, and is, a vital part of Christian practice" (Brosend 2004, 97). Here lies the significance of the passage. A person can be destroyed by an uncontrolled tongue, or a person can be built up by a controlled tongue. Individuals who do not control their tongues will inevitably cause significant harm and destruction to others, while those who control their tongue will bring much good to others, such as peace, encouragement and healing. This is evident

in Christian churches of the past and in Christian churches of today. We read about such examples in the New Testament, in the letters written to the first churches, and we also personally experience and actively engage in these dynamics within the churches we attend. Therefore, the message of this text holds crucial significance for every Christian and every church.

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