

### 3. *The value of the visual interpretation approach.*

I would like to quote a phrase of Algirdas Greimas, the eminent French semiotician: "It is extremely difficult to talk about meaning and say anything meaningful about it".<sup>12</sup> Exegetes may have a distinctive role in the interpretation of the Bible but they do not exercise a monopoly. They are not owners of the Holy Scripture. The academic analysis of texts is necessary and indispensable, but it cannot be the only one, or exhaustive. One cannot regard the Bible as a collection of historical documents dealing with its own origins. The Bible as the Word of God is addressed both to the Church and to the entire world at the present time.<sup>13</sup> This conviction leads in turn to the work of actualizing and inculturating the biblical message, as well as to various uses of the inspired text in religious and also pure cultural sense.

To conclude, the Bible is neither a classic of human aspirations nor a noble monument to the potential of creative imagination.<sup>14</sup> It is a witness to God's entrance into our history in an incarnate form as a gracious act of redemption of the world. We read and listen to the Scripture in order to be transformed by the promise of the Gospel. The Bible in its twofold witness of the Old and the New Testament (or, if you will, the First and the Second Testament) remains God's gift to the Church and the world, a source of life for the present and a promise for the future. This reality is already visible in the images, pictures, paintings, and after that will be with sight in facts.<sup>15</sup>

We can repeat after Psalm 36:10

beoreka nir'eh 'ōr  
"in thy light  
shall we see light".

<sup>12</sup> "Il est extrêmement difficile de parler du sens et d'en dire quelque chose du sensé". *De sens: Essais sémiotiques*, Paris 1970, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> See *The Document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission*, IV. See further R. C. Hill, *Breaking the Bread of the Word: Principles of Teaching Scripture*, Ed. PIB, Roma 1991; P. Laghi, M. Gilbert, A. Vanhoye, *Chiesa e Sacra Scrittura. Un secolo di magistero ecclesiastico e studi biblici*, Ed. PIB, Roma 1994; D. J. A. Clines, *The Bible and the Modern World*, Sheffield 1997.

<sup>14</sup> See B. S. Childs, *op. cit.*, p. 726.

<sup>15</sup> See R. Jensen, *Giving Texts Vision and Images Voice: The Promise and Problems of Interdisciplinary Scholarship*, and D. R. Cartlidge, *Which Path as the Crossroads? Early Christian Art as a Hermeneutical and Theological Challenge* [in:] *Common Life in the Early Church: Essays Honoring Graydon F. Snyder*, ed., by J. V. Hills, Trinity Press International, Fall 1998 (private communication).

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## HOW TO BE WEALTHY? THE LETTER OF JAMES AND THE PROBLEM OF WEALTH

### Introduction

I would like to present several problems which arise from the analysis of the texts of the Letter of James which contain the word *plousios*.

### I. The rich man boasts in his humiliation (Jas 1.9-11)

The first text contains a paradoxical appeal to the rich: 'Let the lowly brother (*tapeinos*) boast (*kauchastho*) in his exaltation, and the rich (*plousios*) in his humiliation (*tapeinosis*), because like the flower of the grass he will pass away.' (Jas 1.9-10)

#### 1. Exegesis

The command to boast is directed towards both the poor and the rich, which means that no irony is intended here.

The verb *kauchastho* (to boast), used in a positive sense in the OT, has God or the Law (Sir 39.8) as object (Ps 5.12; 32.11)<sup>1</sup>. In the NT, Paul on the one hand argues against vanity and the placing of one's trust in good works (Rom 3.27; Eph 2.8) and on the other encourages Christians to boast 'of the Lord' (2 Cor 10.17), 'in God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom 5.11), 'in the cross of the Lord' (cf. 1 Cor 2.2). The object of boasting determines the value of the act.

In the NT the term *tapeinosis*<sup>2</sup> appears three times in the context of death. Acts 8.32-35 quotes from Is 53.7 f. (LXX) the testimony concerning the Servant of Yahweh who underwent humiliation. In Phil 3.21 we find the phrase

<sup>1</sup> R. Bultmann, *kauchomai*, TDNT 3, 645-654.

<sup>2</sup> W. Grundmann, *tapeinos*, TDNT 8, 1-26.

to *soma tes tapeinoseos* (the humiliated, lowly body). This humiliation is seen to be a result of death. The third relevant text is the one discussed in this article.

In Jas the term *tapeinosis* is interpreted with the help of the image of passing away (1.10b-11), the climax of which is the moment of death. The image of the rising sun and the withering grass illustrates the determinism and certainty of death which deprives a man of his social status, his flowering life. T. W. Leahy interprets 'humiliation' as the 'transitory nature of his wealthy status, described in the following phrases', while F. Mussner speaks of the death of the rich man as '... infatti il soggetto di *paraleusetai* e il *plousios*'.<sup>3</sup> That which leads to death, as well as death itself, is the motif of the rich man's boasting.<sup>4</sup> This paradox is explained by the context of the NT.

Since in the first sentence, we find the juxtaposition of the terms *plousios* - *tapeinos*, the term *tapeinos* is to be interpreted as 'poor'. In the sphere of religion, *tapeinos* signifies an appropriate relation between man and God, or between people.

## 2. The Synoptic context

In the Synoptic tradition of the NT we find the juxtaposed terms: 'humiliated - exalted', 'exalted - humbled': to those who humble themselves is given the promise of being exalted; those who exalt themselves will be humiliated (Lk 14.11; Lk 18.14; Mt 23.11-12).<sup>5</sup> The ultimate reason for assuming such an attitude in life is Jesus' example: 'Learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart'. (Mt 11.28-30).

The first part of the synoptic formula is the same as in Jas: the poor (humiliated) man is to boast in his exaltation. Exaltation is understood here as election by God and the gift of the Kingdom of God. The poor are already exalted, and this will be revealed in its fullness in the last days.

<sup>3</sup> T. W. Leahy, *The Epistle of James*, NJBC, 911; F. Mussner, *La lettera di Giacomo*, Brescia 1970, 111; 'die Hinfälligkeit des menschlichen Lebens zu bedenken und daraus die notwendigen Folgerungen zu ziehen' (G. Strecker, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Berlin - New York 1996, 715).

<sup>4</sup> '... certamente uno strano "gloriarsi", ma vale solo come conseguenza di una valutazione radicalmente escatologica dell'esistenza, la quale tiene d'occhio "le cose ultime"' (F. Mussner, *op.cit.* 110).

<sup>5</sup> Most authors agree that James makes use of the antithesis 'humiliation - exaltation' when considering the question of the poor and the rich (cf. F. Mussner, *op.cit.*, 113-124). However, they do not link this pattern with the 'humiliation and exalta-

The second part, however, differs, from the synoptic tradition: instead of 'he, who exalts himself' we find 'the rich man' and instead of 'will be humbled' we find 'and the rich man [boast] in his humiliation'. The rest of the sentence shows that it is not here a question of eschatological humiliation (as is the case in the synoptic tradition) but of the future concerning this present life on earth. 'The rich man' is to boast of the fact that 'like the flower of the grass he will pass away' (1.10b), that is, he should boast of his future death.

The synoptic formula allows us to conclude that the rich man's boasting of his humiliation also presents a religious reality, as a parallel to the first part of the antithesis which traditionally has a religious content.

## 3. The Pauline context

In Phil 2.6-11, Paul applies the juxtaposed terms 'humiliation - exaltation' to Christ. Through his obedience and death on the cross, Christ humbled himself (*etapeinosen heauton*) and therefore God exalted (*hyperyposen*) him (Phil 2.8-9). We can therefore find in James a reference to the life of Christ. Since everybody dies, we are all somehow joined to the death of Christ. In the case of the rich man, the fact of death is particularly stressed. This is his *tapeinosis*, which likens him to Christ. Recollection of this moment, a life lived in the perspective of death, liberates man from the illusory nature of wealth and reminds him that he should not place his trust in material possessions. An appropriate attitude towards wealth can only be gained by integrating the perspective of eternity with the temporal dimension of life.

## Conclusions

The dilemma of wealth in the NT is solved differently than in revolutionary systems. The NT does not propose revolution or radical equality.

## II. Wealth in its Socio-Religious Categories

In the fragment 2.1-13, James speaks of the appropriate attitude of the community towards the problem of wealth.<sup>6</sup> One can say that the problem is considered in socio-religious categories.

tion of Christ', which I propose here.

<sup>6</sup> 'Impregnato di una forte carica soteriologica il cap.2 invita l'uomo a usare la fede come criterio dei suoi giudizi storici e parimenti le opere come criterio della propria fede. Una simile conclusione ... chiede di ripensare tutta la riduzione teologica in atto nei confronti dello scritto giacobeo' (G. Marconi, *La struttura di Giacomo 2*, "Biblica" 68 (1987) 257-258).

# 1. The Problem of Privileges for the Rich within the Community

The attitude towards the rich manifests the attitude towards faith. Thus, James begins his exhortation from the point of view not of wealth but faith: *My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ.*<sup>7</sup>

A false attitude towards wealth leads to the introduction into faith of differences such as selectivity with regard to charisms or a depreciation of the 'theology of the cross'. James concentrates his attention on the glory of Christ in order to contrast this with the glory of the rich and draw Christians' attention to the fact that the worship of Jesus cannot be reconciled with the worship of anyone else.<sup>8</sup>

An illustration of the false attitude of making differences between rich and poor is found in the treatment given to those coming to the congregation (2.2).<sup>9</sup> The community takes notice of externals: dress and symbols of wealth - gold rings. People are valued and allotted an appropriate place in the assembly.

In this external behaviour, James sees a sign of the inner person: the addressees have become 'judges with evil thoughts', who have not likened themselves to God's justice. **The author then gives the following arguments for equal treatment of all.**

## a. The Example of God

James contrasts the privileged treatment of the rich by the community with God's own way of proceeding; He has chosen the poor to be rich in faith (2.5). The poor are already rich, since faith gives them the certainty of inheriting the Kingdom. In the eschatological future, the poor will be really wealthy. However, not the very fact of poverty gives one the right of inheritance of the Kingdom, but poverty joined to love of God. By highlighting the aspect of love, it is shown that rich people are not condemned *per principium*.

<sup>7</sup> 'Wenn auch über den Inhalt des Christusbekenntnisses nichts weiter gesagt wird, so ist doch deutlich, daß das Credo von der apokalyptischen Orientierung der Ethik des Jakobusbriefes nicht abzutrennen ist' (G.Strecker, *op.cit.*, 699)

<sup>8</sup> 'The introductory admonition warns against combining the faith with "partiality"' (M.Dibelius re. By H Greeven, *James*, Philadelphia 1981, 126).

'Simile casi di culto della personalita sono per Giacomo inconciliabili con la "fede del nostro Signore Gesu Cristo della gloria"' (F.Mussner, *La lettera di Giacomo*, Brescia 1970, 168).

<sup>9</sup> The term synagogue can mean congregation as well as the place of assembly (T.W.Leahy, *The Epistle of James*, JBC, 372).

The prejudicial attitude of the community towards people is judged negatively. All, rich the same as poor, can love God.

## b. The unjust attitude of the rich

James contrasts the oppression by the rich which the community usually experiences with the preconceptions formed by its members as regards rich people.<sup>10</sup> James states that the rich 'oppress the poor', making use of the terminology of the prophets. The broader context indicates that religious oppression (cf. 2.7) and persecution of the Christian community may be meant. The rich are those who blaspheme the 'honourable name by which you are called', which can be only the name of Jesus (Acts 4.17).<sup>11</sup>

## c. Criterion for behaviour: the commandment of love

The next argument for impartiality is an allusion to the commandment of love of neighbour. This commandment is of universal application and has no preferences. The commandment of love of neighbour is described as royal, as keeping this commandment opens up the way to the Kingdom or is to be kept in the Kingdom, which is promised to those who love the Lord (2.5).<sup>12</sup>

## d. Criterion of behaviour: 'Do not kill'

If one accepts the interpretation of the commandment 'Do not kill' according to the Sermon on the Mount, it must be admitted that sins against one's neighbour signify sin against this commandment.<sup>13</sup> It is difficult to bring to light the sin of 'the perfect'. For this reason, there is a mention of keeping the whole of the law<sup>14</sup> understood in the sense of the Sermon on the Mount. The commandment 'Do not kill' is the negative expression of the commandment 'Love'. For James, disdain of the poor is murder, hence this commandment appears in his argumentation. (Jam 2.11). The reference to the commandment 'do not commit adultery', which is not transgressed by the community, serves to highlight the significance of the commandment 'Do

<sup>10</sup> R.Hoppe, *Der thologische Hintergrund des Jakobusbriefes*, Würzburg 1977, 84.

<sup>11</sup> 'So wie die Anrufung des Namens einen Bekenntnisakt darstellt, so drückt sich im *blasphemein* eine Haltung des Unglaubens aus. Den guten Namen lästern "heißt den sich offenbarenden Gott oder den Herrn Jesus Christus schmäden"' (R.Hoppe, *op.cit.*, 86).

<sup>12</sup> 'Since the Mosaic law comes from God, the universal king, it is rightly called royal' (T.W.Leahy, *The Epistle of James*, NJBC, 912).

<sup>13</sup> 'il rifiuto di amare il prossimo era ritenuto, già nella tradizione precedente, una specie di assassinio' (F.Mussner, *op.cit.*, 181).

<sup>14</sup> M. O'R. Boyle, *The Stoic Paradox of James 2.10*, "New Testament Studies" 31 (1985), 611-617.

not kill': sin against neighbour, even though other commandments are kept, makes the Christian a transgressor of the law.<sup>15</sup>

#### e. The principles of the future judgment

The next argument is the nature of the future judgment. The current life influences the quality of eternal life. The judgment of man will be grounded in the law of liberty which is summarised in the commandment of love and in the Decalogue. Mercy, which 'triumphs over judgment', plays a fundamental role on the day of judgment. However, the condition for receiving mercy is an attitude of mercy towards others in life (Mt 5.7). The commandment 'Love your neighbour' is supplemented by 'be merciful towards the poor'. Mercy implies exceeding the 'exact measure' of the commandments and a greater love in situations of physical and moral evil.

#### Conclusions

The problem of wealth is also a problem of the Christian community. James opposes the privileged treatment of the rich, as this has no ground in God. He calls upon several arguments which show why the wealthy should not be preferentially treated, so that they can escape the trap which wealth can have in store for them.

### III. The Problem of the Misuse of Wealth and Social Injustice

In the third text which has a prophetic character, James condemns wealth obtained by way of injustice (5.1-6).<sup>16</sup>

#### 1. Punishment for wealth unjustly gained

The call to lament is not a call to penitence but the prediction of an on-coming catastrophe which will fall upon the rich. Sentence is passed. James does not deal with the possibility of conversion. He shows the consequences which must follow injustice. That wealth loses its value serves to illustrate the folly of acquiring goods at all cost.

<sup>15</sup> The statement in 2.11 'If you do not commit adultery ...' explains the appearance in 2.11 of the feminine plural *moichalides*: the author uses the feminine form, so as to maintain the consistency of both texts. Other proposals for the interpretation of Jam 4.4 are discussed by J.J. Schmitt, *You Adulteresses! The Image in James 4:4*, "Novum Testamentum" 28 (1986) 327-337.

<sup>16</sup> 'Jak 5,1-6 ist eine Spruchreihe in der Form prophetischer Anklage. Der Autor hat apokalyptische und weisheitliche Motive aufgenommen und zusammengestellt' (R.Hoppe, *op.cit.*, 13); M.dibelius, *op.cit.*, 235.

Wealth is portrayed as valueless and in a negative manner: riches have rotted, garments are moth-eaten, gold and silver have rusted. This ruined wealth serves two functions. It bears evidence against the rich at the eschatological judgment. The second function is that it serves as an instrument of punishment: it will eat flesh like fire. The wealthy who amassed their riches did not notice that the end of time and final judgment were near.

#### 2. Wealth and Social Wrong (5.4)

In verse 5.4 wealth is linked to social wrong. The rich do not remain alone with their wealth but exist within a network of relations which they violate by their way of life. Social injustice is indicated as the source of wealth: the wages of the labourers which were kept back. We find here a synthetic parallelism. In the first part there is talk of the wages of the labourers, in the second part of the their cries. The Lord is involved in this affair of unjustly acquired wealth as the ultimate authority who can see that justice is done.

The rich are condemned for their egoism. Their life is described as a day of slaughter. It is worth noting the eschatological connotation which indicates a lack of eschatological awareness. The rich do not recognise the signs of the times and just as the rich man in the Gospel of Luke, seek the pleasures of life (cf. Lk 16.19).

In the last sentence (5.6), the author speaks of the relation between the rich and their neighbours in negative terms: you have condemned, you have killed the righteous. Perhaps there is an allusion here to judiciary proceedings. James has in mind the experiences of the Christian community with its opponents, who are wealthy people.<sup>17</sup> In primordial preaching, the word *dikaïos* was applied to Jesus, who suffers in this way in the members of the community.

#### Conclusions

This text portrays situations existing in society in order to warn Christians against similar tendencies. Wealth acquired by way of social injustice (wages kept back) is passing and calls out to God for vengeance; in the end it will turn against the rich themselves. The radical change of aeon which has taken place with the coming of Christ calls for the use of wealth for the good of others.

<sup>17</sup> 'Dennoch ist der Abschnitt für das Verhältnis der christlichen Gemeinde des Jakobus zu den wohlhabenden Kreisen im grundsätzlichen aufschlußreich (G.Strecker, *op.cit.*, 714).

#### IV. Other questions related to 'wealth' in the Letter of James

Three texts in the letter of James are linked to the question of wealth, even though they do not contain the term *plousios*.

##### 1. The care of orphans and widows (1.26-27)

James gives an example of pure religion: 'to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world'. This is not a criticism of worship; the prophets criticised religion which neglected social duties in favour of those linked to worship. Help given to 'orphans and widows' (1.27), that is to those most vulnerable who at the same time form an ever-present group within society, is presented as a *permanent* commitment for the rich. Care of orphans and widows is a way of protecting oneself against a worldly life-style.

##### 2. Refusal to help the needy (2.15 f.)

In 2.15 f., James gives an example which is to show the uselessness of faith without works. The needy have received no help from pious expressions: 'Go in peace'. James does not present a specific case of neglect which took place in the community. He gives a well-composed image based on the demands of the OT and the teaching of Jesus. The text does not mention the wealthy as such, but speaks of the members of the community. These words, however, refer to those who have material goods at their disposal and are obliged to see to the *occasional* needs of their neighbour.

##### 3. Doing the will of the Lord (Jas 4.13-17)

Even though the text of 4.13-17 does not contain the word *plousios*, it must be taken into account during an analysis of the question of wealth for the following reasons: in 4.13 there is talk of trade and gain; in 4.16 we find the word *kauchasthe*, which appears in 1.9; in 4.16 we find the term *aladzoneia*, which in Wis 5.8 (LXX) is linked with the term *ploutos*; the short span of life is related to the perspective of death in 1.9-11.

The character of the text is that of a prophetic admonition. Those who are the object of criticism regard themselves as masters of their time, of 'today' and 'tomorrow'. Their goal is profit, and their method, journeying from town to town. James shows the uncertainty of the future in order to shatter the illusions of those who plan great profits. Life does not depend on the will of man, but on God.

The *Conditio Iacobeae* gives the conditions which must be fulfilled in order that one should be able to make plans for the future.<sup>18</sup> Christians submit

<sup>18</sup> K. Backhaus, *Conditio Iacobeae. Jüdische Weisheitstradition und christliche Alltagsethik nach Jak 4,13-17*; K. Backhaus et al. (Hrsg.), *Schrift und Tradition*, F.

their plans to the will of the Lord and not to their own fancy. The condition 'if the Lord wills' (4.15) indicates the dependence of the future on the Lord, both in the case of existence and in human planning.

Human plans undertaken without taking into account the will of the Lord are called by the name pride - *aladzoneia* (arrogance). In Wis 5.7-8, arrogance is linked with wealth, which is transient. Those who make plans for the future are also capable of doing good. If they do not do so, they sin. Their autonomous thinking in life is sinful.

#### Conclusions

True religion expresses itself in a commitment to the needy, either permanent (1.26) or occasional (2.15). Such an attitude assumes a supernatural dimension in life and entails resignation from autonomy understood as complete independence from God.

#### V. Concluding Remarks

There are no doubts about the abuses related to wealth and a wealthy life-style. The rich flaunt their wealth by their gold and the way they dress (2.2) and lead a care-free life (5.5). They demonstrate their power by oppressing others (the community) and by dragging them before the courts (2.6; 5.6). They acquire their wealth by keeping back due wages (5.4). They also sin against the Lord: they *blaspheme that honourable name* (c.7) and plan undertakings without taking into account the will of the Lord (4.15). The Christian community, on the other hand, favours the rich and commits sin by treating them better than the poor. The community judges on the basis of external appearances, forgetting about the oppression suffered at the hands of the wealthy (2.3).

As a method for 'escaping the trap of wealth', James suggests an enlivening of the religious dimension of life. The perspective of death which opens man up to the eschatological dimension, must be kept in mind (1.9). The humiliation of death is the rich man's participation in the humiliation of Christ, which also reveals the perspective of the resurrection. The religious aspect of existence is also to be renewed by acknowledging the Lord as ruler of history (*Conditio Iacobeae*, 4.15). Besides this vertical dimension, James does

Schöningh, Paderborn (1966) 135-158; 'Jakobus hat den Christen die Auswanderung und den Handel nicht verboten; nur das eine verlangt, er, daß über jedem Unternehmen die Ergebung in den Willen des Herrn stehe' (A. Schlatter, *op.cit.*, 264).

not forget about commitment to the poor: orphans and widows (1.17). and those who are in immediate need (2.15).

The Letter of James is relevant especially today, when the gap between the rich and poor is broadening. The solutions proposed are usually located on the horizontal plane and are expressed in terms of help of the rich for the poor, or of helping the poor to help themselves in eradicating poverty. Without the renewal of religion, faith in eternal life and the consciousness of the limits of one's own existence, it is difficult to find a sufficient motive for wealthy people to distance themselves from their wealth. Faith is the ultimate sphere which is capable of radically changing a person's attitude towards wealth and of opening him up to the needs of the poor.

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### THE GENRE OF THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

The genre of the Gospel of Matthew as of the other Gospels has been an object of discussion for nearly a hundred years. There are many opinions on this subject. Two of them are the most widespread: the opinion of Wendland (1912), according to which the Gospels are popular narratives, and the opinion of Votaw (1912), that the Gospels belong to the genre of biography. The first one was taken over by K.L. Schmidt (1923), who likens the Gospels to "Kleinliteratur". Schmidt calls the evangelists "naive popular narrators". A similar opinion was proclaimed by M. Dibelius (1933) and R. Bultmann (1972). According to Bultmann the Gospels are not biographies because we do not find in them interesting historical and biographical themes such as, the human personality of Jesus, His family, education, development, appearance and character.

In the second half of the twentieth century many scholars have taken the side of Votaw, modifying his opinion a little. We can list here: M. Hadas and M. Smith (1965), J.M. Robinson and H. Koester (1971), Talbert (1977), L. Schuler (1982), and K. Berger (1984). Dormier and Frankmölle (1984) are a little cautious about including the Gospels among the biographies known in antiquity.

But, there still are scholars who disagree with the opinion of Votaw and similar opinions. At the meeting in Tübingen in 1982 R. Guelich denied the thesis of Schuler and stated that the Gospels had no parallels in Jewish and Greco-Roman literature. This opinion is shared by A. Dihle (1983), F.G. Downing (1985), and P. Stuhlmacher (1985).

It seems certain to us that neither the opinion of Wendland - Schmidt nor that of Votaw, with various modifications, is correct. First of all it is wrong to assume that Matthew read some biographies of Greek philosophers, and even more to believe that he wanted to follow them. Matthew does not want to know anything outside of the Judaic tradition; the Greco-Roman world is