

THE WAGE'S CRY:

A LITERARY AND SOCIOLOGICAL READING OF JAMES 5:1-11

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How can James 5:1-11 still speak powerfully today, now that the grand social utopias have been renounced and the rhetoric of liberation and its allied movements ring hollow? This essay aims to see and hear James as his original audience¹ did. To do that, I have attempted to discern the “world” which first saw this text delivered, reading this text poetically² then sociologically³. I will end with an admittedly short and limited look at the text in the light of the post-modern context we live in today.

A poetic reading: the text's message and world

How did James structure this literary unit? What poetic technique did he use to do so? Finding satisfactory answers to these questions is complex. But it is necessary and possible to do so⁴. Traditional exegesis breaks it down into two main parts: (1) v 1-6 and (2) v 7-11⁵. This structure is consistent. But it overlooks this unit's poetic structure⁶. We

¹ See footnote 50 for more about the audience. In this interpretation exercise, however, I do not want to sidestep the big hermeneutical issues which may lie in the way of reading the text in the light I intend to read it. One of the widely accepted issues is the fact that a completely objective view is unrealistic. See my essay “La historicidad del texto y el lugar del texto en la interpretación poética”, *Kairós*; Juan Stam B.”, *Ciencias del lenguaje y hermenéutica evangélica*, *Boletín Teológico* 27/58 (1995) 63-68.

² There are various leanings, but, what distinguishes this synchronic methods from critical-historical methods its focus on the text's literary beauty and on the “world” (i.e. reality) behind it, and on the original message's ability to reflect that external reality and to address it compellingly. This being the case, in the view of Adele Berlin (*Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*; Sheffield, England: The Almond Press, 1983, 13-21), poetics and interpretation (as well as other hermeneutical tools) prove complementary without neglecting the text's ability to address current reality. This method, it follows, is synchronic, historically aware, multidisciplinary, context-rooted and stems from the notion that the Bible can be regarded as literature, John B. Gabel and Charles B. Wheeler, *A Bíblia como Literatura*, translated by Adail Ubirajara Sobral and Maria Stela Gonçalves (São Paulo, Brasil: Loyola, 1993) 17-26; George Reyes, “Poética del texto narrativo”, *Kairós* 30-31 (2002) 33-56, 7-25. The first part of this essay, therefore, is a short and limited attempt.

³ This is likewise an unassuming attempt at condensing some of the social, cultural and ideological context mirrored in the text. Doing so is possible, as the biblical text usually provides a legitimate “ethnographic report” or description of the social, cultural and ideological atmosphere from a given perspective. See M. Daniel Carroll R., “Re-examining ‘Popular Religion’ Issues of Definition and Sources. Insights from Interpretative Anthropology”, *Rethinking Contexts, Rereading Texts*, ed. by M. Daniel Carroll R. (Sheffield, England, Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 147-167. Here, my notion of ideology is both positive and descriptive. It is the body of religious ideas, beliefs or thoughts (theology) we can infer in the text (James' in particular). So, when I say, “from his ideological viewpoint”, I am referring to the theological and ethical stance whence he denounces, imparts judgement and speaks of solidarity (see footnote 44). That said I also use the notion of ideology pejoratively (when I refer to the viewpoints and attitudes of the rich that James condemns). But even then, my intention here is not to refer to the ideological context underlying the production of the text.

⁴ In literary biblical analysis, a look at how the text is structured is vital as it casts light on the text's original message and on the world behind it.

⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *Tiago: Introdução e Comentário*, translated by Robinson Norberto Malkomes (São Paulo, Brasil: Vida Nova, 1990) 158-72.

⁶ Also in New Testament epistle literature, there are three drives that need to be taken into account. These are 1) the historical drive, 2) the theological or religious drive, and 3) the literary drive. So neither can we discern the message of an epistle if we overlook the poetics that envelop it; Leland Ryken, “The Literature of the New

will suggest that a structure – which reveals the text’s organisation and artistic symmetry, as well as glimpses into what James announces and denounces – is discernible within the text.

A v. 1 ; Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.

B v. 2-3 Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten... You have laid up treasure in the last days...

C v.4 Behold, the wages of the labourers... have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

B’ v. 5-6 You have lived on the earth in luxury... and self-indulgence... you have fattened... You have condemned; you have murdered the righteous person...

A’ v. 7-11. Be patient, therefore, brothers... Do not grumble... As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets... the Lord is compassionate.

This structure reveals two typical and central aspects of this technique: The first is parallelism (A and A’; B and B’), and the second is a central point (C) on which the parallel lines converge, which highlights the core message. Lines A and A’ are contrastingly parallel, B and B’ are synonymously parallel. In verse 1 (A), the author addresses the rich, one of the main characters and key targets of his message (v. 1a). He denounces them and announces their impending judgement (v. 1b). Contrastingly, in verses 7-11 (A’), he addresses the other protagonists, the “brothers”. Here, he does not announce judgement: he speaks to console them and urges them to be patient “until the coming of the Lord” (v. 7). So the emphasis in both those lines is contrasting⁷.

The synonymous parallelism between lines B and B’ is self-evident. Generally speaking, in line B (v. 2-3) the author spells out what the judgement involves and disparages the selfish accumulation of wealth; then, in B’ (v. 5-6), moves on to scorn their easy lives, corruption and murder (but without mentioning judgement). So the accusation aspect suggests semantic or conceptual parallelism between these two lines⁸. This structural analysis will help as we move onto more detailed exegesis⁹.

Testament”, *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. by Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1993) 361-75. That justifies the poetic reading of the epistles.

⁷ Both lines also have a perceivable eschatological element, which provides synonymous parallelism as well. But the semantic contrast is predominant. If the author starts and ends his unit doing the same thing, he is arguably using a rhetorical device called an inclusion (*inclusio*). This semantic (as it were) inclusion could indeed tie the beginning and the end of our unit together, corroborating our delimitation. Exegetically speaking, that means that the author’s line of thought ends in verse 11 (not, as some Spanish and Portuguese versions suggest, in verse 6).

⁸ The rich in the world behind this text had clearly done specific things: on the one hand, they had selfishly amassed wealth, on the other they had squandered it, twisted justice and murdered the poor. That specific doing could also provide a semantic link between these two lines. Other possible semantic links could be, in the ethos behind this text, that squandering, twisted justice and murder are natural outgrowths of the selfish amassing of wealth. Revealingly, both lines describe desolation: the first (B) is associated with the wealth, the associated second (B’) with those who had amassed it. But, at the end of the day, the author is addressing the people in both lines.

⁹ This analysis, using the limited 1960 *Reina Valera* version, as has been said, will also overlook some textual issues.

(A) *Denouncing and announcing judgement* (v. 1). The line of thought that runs through the last verses in chapter 4 and the first ones in chapter 5 is not easy to ascertain¹⁰. Whatever this letter's literary genre, it is possible to see that James connects 4:13-17 and 5:1-6 from a thematic standpoint. After asserting that living faith should yield humility (4:1-12), he speaks of the transient aspect of life (4:13-17)¹¹ and of wealth (5:1-6). That is why he goes on to denounce the rich merchant's supposed self-reliance, described in a monologue (v. 13b)¹², declaring the nature of their lives ("...you are a mist...", v. 14) and urges them to choose a spiritually-driven life, depending on God and on his sovereign will, and thereby to do "the right thing»(v. 15-17). In chapter 5:1-6, he likewise criticises and urges spiritually-driven life (he condemns the rich landowners' injustice, announces looming judgement, and – implicitly, at least – urges them to exercise justice and mercy). So there is a connection between both chapters¹³.

The author begins with a prophetic speech using the imperative *ague nun* which, followed by the noun "rich»is obviously used as an interjection – Come now, you rich! (v. 1a; 4:13a) – not as a verb. The purpose is rhetorical: he wants to attract the protagonists' (and the reader's) attention, and then both emphatically and sarcastically introduce the denunciation and announcement of judgement hanging over them¹⁴. The protagonists are onomatopoeically told to react: when presented with that message, they were supposed to

¹⁰ Much of this difficulty is due to the letter's literary genre in general. Classifications range from "parenetic" or "prophetic admonishment" to "homily"; see respectively José Geraldo Costa Grillo (even though he only ascribes this genre to verses 1-6), "O salário retido está clamando a *IAHWEH*", *Revista Teológica* 56/41 (1995) 9-10; Moo, *Tiago*, 39-40; also see the (debatable) suggestion of Paulo Augusto de Souza Nogueira, "O grito do salário: Conflito no mundo do trabalho em Tiago 4,13-5,6", *Estudos Bíblicos* 44 (1994) 78-79. This genre reverts, in Moo's view (on those same pages), to a feature that spreads through the work: a lot of it is a succession of short and seemingly unrelated paragraphs, which makes it difficult to surmise logical links between one unit and another, and to home in on the letter's central idea; against Martin Dibelius, *James*, translated by Michael A. Williams (Philadelphia, USA: Fortress, 1976) 1-11, and Evis L. Carballosa, *James: Una fe en acción* (Barcelona, España: Portavoz, 1986) 74-77; Dibelius observes linguistic factors tying the work together and Carballosa convincingly asserts that the overriding central idea here is that living faith produces works that honour God.

¹¹ De Souza Nogueira, in "O grito", 82, sustains that James does not stress the arrogance and self-sufficiency of the rich as much as their transience and frailty (v.14). Indeed, James uses a metaphor that encapsulates the notions of transience and frailty beautifully: These people's life (not unlike every human being) is mist: it disappears as swiftly as it appears (1: 9-11). So we can see that James does not only overturn their wealth, power and privileges (the freedom to plan for the future, do business and anticipate possible gains) of yesteryear: he also presents them in a negative and realistic light, and imparts his own ideological viewpoint.

¹² Who, behind God's back, still think they can control *cronos* and life. "All such boasting", James says, "is evil" (v. 16b).

¹³ This thematic line of through would be clearer if we accepted the possibility that the rich merchants in 4:13-17 are the same ones as in 5:1-6. Note, too, another linguistic bridge: the expression "Come now!" is used in 4:13a and in 5:1a, which may well shore up the thematic link between both chapters; against Costa Grillo who, in "O salário", 7-8, considers that 5:1-6 is an independent unit.

¹⁴ James B. Adamson, en *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans, 1976) 183-184, points out that this "apostrophic" way of addressing the rich, using a vocative with a definite article (*oi*) shows that they were perceived as a "heathen social cast". "That is the reason", Adamson adds in *A Commentary on James* (Pennsylvania, USA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1983) 347, "why 5:1-6 does not include an urge to repent, but only the word of condemnation". However, a careful look at the entire letter would suggest otherwise, even if this "class" may have been a minority in synagogues, and James somehow sent out his message to unbelieving rich people too.

weep (shout, groan, wail or, better, howl) their sadness¹⁵ anticipating the “misery»about to befall them (v. 1b)¹⁶. The reasons brought forward (and reproved) are recorded in lines B and B’, which we will analyse later.

(A’) *Consoling and urging heroic perseverance* (v. 7-11). The semantic contrast between this line and the one before it is decisive. The transitional particle, therefore, (v. 7a) points to the fact that the consolation is a consequence of what has just been said (A, v. 1-6)¹⁷.

If God wants to bring judgement on the guilty (v. 4, C), the incriminated “brothers»(see 1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 12; 4:13) not only need to trust this act of justice or see it as a reason for encouragement: they also need to exercise patience until that time comes, i.e. as long as the grievance lasts. This plays a key role: the word “patience»comes up in practically every verse in this line (v. 7ab, 8a, 10a, 11). And it is underlined by the complementary parallelism between verses 7 and 8:

v. 7 Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord...

v. 8 You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand...

Both are basically the same. However, the first uses the farmer awaiting the “precious fruit” (precious, that is, because his survival depended on it) to exemplify patience (v. 7b),¹⁸ the second adds a metaphorical exhortation complementing the previous one: “Establish (or strengthen) your hearts” (v.8b). This is nothing more than an urge to strengthen inner spiritual life by braving suffering – but not until the coming of the Lord: because the Lord is “at hand” (v. 8b). So, as it turns out, the exercise of patience seems to have an aim, or last a given period of time. And it is essential in the light of the Lord’s imminent return. Because James knew that patience, strength and an imminent return are key aspects of the inspiration we need in the face of suffering. But there is one important detail that would be worth looking at in this situation.

As you may recall, in New Testament days, the term *parousia* (“presence” or “return”) had become a technical term and the most common way of referring to the Lord’s imminent return. His return, likewise, entailed humanity’s judgement (see Mt. 24:37, 39; 2 Thes. 2:8). So this exhortation becomes even more relevant. It reminds suffering communities of this eschatological aspect. Not to help them resign themselves to suffering; to the contrary, to encourage them because they were about to be freed from oppression and suffering, and because those who had caused them suffering would get what they deserved. For, “Behold, the Judge is standing at the door” (v. 9b)¹⁹ and to Him alone belongs

¹⁵ The participle *ololyzontes*, in this case, is best taken as a modal describing the persistency of the wailing: howling with sorrow (see Is. 13:6, 11). So we can perceive (or perchance even hear) some of the dramatic intensity and impact that this admonition must have had on its original audience. So, through those rhetoric techniques, James reveals more than his psychology and prophetic vein: he also shows his talent as a wordsmith and his knack for using the right word at the right time.

¹⁶When? The eschatological context imbibing this unit suggests that the howling may point to an eschatological future; see Moo, *Tiago*, 159. But that possibility does not exclude the fact that the howling, in this context (v. 2-3) can originate in the same space and time as the denunciation.

¹⁷ This particle literarily and semantically links 1-6 and 7-11.

¹⁸ In reality, to harvest the fruit, farmers had to wait until the earth had had the “early and late” rainfalls, both of which were vital (see Dt 11:14). The farmer’s patience, in other words, was twofold.

¹⁹ Note the author’s figurative language to express the Lord’s imminent return and judgement. The word “behold” (v. 9b) not only jolted readers: it also stressed the fact that the author’s ideological point of view was about to be disclosed.

judgement. This is to forestall a tendency to grumble and accuse each other that human beings often have in the face of injustice and suffering (v. 9a)²⁰. The exhortation, it follows, is not to take justice into their own hands, as doing so could cause them to be judged (v. 9b; see Mt.7:1). So, in that light, we can appreciate James' poetic style and persuasive pastoral tactics, as well as his Christological, ethical²¹ and eschatological²² stances.

Verses 10 and 11 take up the call for patience, again revealing James' stance and pastoral tactics. In verse 10, he urges his suffering readers to emulate the heroic perseverance in the face of affliction that the prophets – who “spoke in the name of the Lord” (v 10b) braving injustice, loneliness, misunderstanding, persecution and death²³ – had shown. Note that according to James, the “blessed” are precisely those who have persevered heroically in the face of suffering (v 11a)²⁴. As an eloquent example, he mentions Job. Readers, we can assume, were familiar with Job's heroic perseverance and ensuing reward²⁵ (v. 11b). And all that, James adds, because (*hoti*)²⁶ the Lord is compassionate and merciful (v. 11c). Thus, with his pastoral aims, James ends off this exhortation expressing his ideological viewpoint about God, personifying him as a compassionate and merciful being – which, as we know, rings of the faithfulness God had shown to covenants of old. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the pastoral message that James is hinting at for his original readers is that God has pledged to fulfil his promises to his people, and will hence be merciful and compassionate towards them, too²⁷. James voices this ideological viewpoint more directly in the remaining lines of our structure.

20 Did James mean his communities were not supposed to complain about the injustice of the rich when he said “against one another”? Or was it associated with an indiscriminate practice among themselves? In the light of this context, we could say both apply, as that grumbling can occur in the face of the impotence and pain that injustice causes, and because mutual accusation seems to be fairly common in these communities (3; 4:11-12) – and universally human, as it were.

21 In James' perspective, eschatology does not encourage escapism or religious irresponsibility (“we're saved so who cares what we do”). It is relevant to our current situation: it elicits a spiritual and ethical stance that does not dodge the here-and-now aspects of life – and of one's own home.

22 Throughout history, every generation of believers has entertained hopes of being the last before the coming of the Lord. As indeed did the primitive church. That is why James assumes this eschatological and Christological stance.

23 Even though the meaning of a word is shaped by how it is used in its context, and its root can illustrate its meaning without determining it (see footnote 29), some exegetes suggest that, in this context, *kakopatheia* should be translated as “resistance in suffering”, not just “affliction”, because that is the meaning of the verb whence it derives. On that account, the model readers are encouraged to emulate is heroic resistance in the face of suffering, whereas *makrothymia* (“patience”) describes the way in which it was exercised; Moo, *Tiago*, 170; Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, 192. This resistance to exhaustion or heroic perseverance which does not collapse in the face of suffering or oppression is, in this context, also embodied in the verb *hypomenô*, used in verse 11.

24 Note, again, the use of “behold” denoting the author's ideological viewpoint.

25 James uses metonymy (whereby a subordinate word replaces the object that the author wants to express). In that case, the expression to *telos* (“the end”) would replace the idea of the reward. We will therefore argue that James wanted to say, “... you have seen the rewards that the Lord gave Job»once he had heroically resisted the trial (see Job 42: 10-17); see Carballosa, *James*, 239.

26 The conjunction *hoti* is used here to introduce a sentence that is subordinated, but with a continuative function. That is why, in this context, we preferred to translated it as “because”.

27 Carballosa, *James*, 238.

(B, B') *Judgement and admonition* (v. 2-3, 5-6). The judgement against the rich and their possessions announced in line A is spelled out in line B. Then in line B', James points his finger at the abuse and cruelty that, in the world behind this text, are seen implicitly as further reasons for judgement.

The judgement²⁸, to be precise, begins with the current destruction²⁹ of what they have lived for, wealth (v.2-3a). James then declares that their wealth has “rotted”,³⁰ their garments are “moth-eaten” (v. 2) and their gold and silver are “corroded” (v. 3a). James seems to believe that their wealth has been ruined supernaturally at the time he is speaking, because the rich had greedily and selfishly³¹ “laid up treasure in the last days” (v 3c; see Lk 12:21). That is possibly why James, using antropopeia, simile and symbol at once announces that the corrosion – akin to a being steeped in greed and a famished beast devouring everything in its way like fire – is going to be evidence against them in the final verdict of their guilt: God’s judgement (v. 3b). Here, once again, James’ sense of irony and eschatological viewpoint shine through. The riches that in days gone by conferred power and status now lay waste in a mound of misery, pain and judgement. As we have said, early-day believers (James included) were persuaded that Jesus was about to return (and hence entertained hopes of being the last generation). Ironically, they had forgotten that the return or the last days would bring wrath and the revelation of God’s justice (Ro. 2:5; Acts 17:30-31), when all will be repaid for their works. That being the case, James’ ideological and ethical stance is clear, too. In his view, one should not accumulate any form of wealth: amassing riches at this climatic point in history made no sense.

Vulnerable as they are, stripped of the power, status and privileges they enjoyed in times gone by, the rich stand accused once again of their past crimes (v. 5-6)³². In verse 5, in a nutshell, James accuses them of an easy life “on the earth” (i.e. during their lives). Subsequently, James announces judgement with a vivid metaphor: “You have fattened your hearts [as] in a day of slaughter” (v.5c). There is some debate about what that means. The explanation that best fits this context is that James is sarcastically comparing them with cattle fattened for sacrifice. If that is the case, he is saying something akin to, “You have quenched your hearts’ desires with your wanton and reckless lives on earth (i.e. the money you amassed in the last days, v 3c), precisely when God’s judgement was about to befall

28. Which reaches its climax in line C (v. 4).

29. Grammar does not always provide categorical arguments, as A. Carson has pointed out in *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Baker, 1984) 67-90. But it is worth pointing out that the verbs *sesepen*, *gegonen* and *katiotai* are used in a perfect tense. Some versions (like the 1960 *Reina Valera*) seem to take that as the prophetic perfect tense of anticipation, instead of historically. They are translated in a present tense to give the impression that they have just happened. Conversely, Moo, in *Tiago*, 161, uses the future tense in v 3b to say that the perfect tense in this context should be interpreted with the natural stress it expresses, stressing the disastrous condition their wealth is in at the time of reading. Whichever is right, James sees the judgement as realised in the form of a supernatural destruction of the wealth.

30. James no doubt uses the word *ploutos* (“wealth”) to refer to the total amassed wealth (and then itemises it straight away).

31. Meaning without sharing it with those in need. Thus selfishness would be a further reason for judgement. James may be stressing this when he repeats the word “your” in these verses. That being the case, at one level of the text, it would be fulfilling a social purpose.

32. James may be summarising the abuse and crimes rich in this line.

you³³. Then, instead of changing their lifestyles, they were incurring even greater guilt by indulging in selfish or reckless pleasures while the poor were enduring hunger, deprivation and humiliation.

In verse 6, James denounces what may have been the ultimate result of the crimes of the rich. They have condemned – worse, killed – the righteous (6a). As *katedikasate* (“you have condemned”) is a legal term, it makes sense to believe James was denouncing the way in which the rich used the courts of their day to their corrupt ends (i.e. to build up more wealth and power). In that situation, the victim (the righteous or *dikaïos*) were impotent in the face of corruption and violence (v. 6b; see 2: 6)³⁴. At the end of the day, they didn’t just lose everything they had: they were murdered, too³⁵, because they were deprived of their livelihood. However, as we have seen and will see again, this apparent defeat is overturned in line C (v.4).

Before that, however, we can see James’ conclusion about the rich in these lines. They are heartless and violent oppressors, and they violate the principle of justice encapsulated in the Old Testament jubilee (Lev. 25).

Now, we will look at the condemnation in line C, the centre of our structure and of James’ prophetic message.

(C) *The wage’s cry* (v. 4). The poetic and prophetic language used here could not be more revealing. It provides a glimpse of the world behind the text. But it unveils more than the underlying indignation and solidarity that James shares with all those who disdain injustice. It also reveals poetic justice, a situation overturned³⁶.

The particle *idou* (“behold”, v. 4a) is even stronger in this context. James uses it to attract his readers’ attention and to warn them that they had better heed the message he is about to impart. The use of the term *apesteremenos*³⁷ suggests that the rich had denied the

33 See Moo, *Tiago*, 164-65. That way, we can see a semantic parallel between “you have fattened... in a day of slaughter” (v 5b) and “you have laid up treasure... in the last days” (v. 3c) as well as “day of slaughter” as a vivid image of imminent destruction (see Is. 30:25).

34. Instead of seeing the last part of the verse as a rhetorical question (“he does not resist?”) begging a positive reply, I would rather respect the final form of the text and, based on the context, take the “righteous” (i.e. the oppressed) as the subject of the verb “resist”. That seems to tally with the fact that James uses the word *dikaïos* (“righteous”) to refer to victims (see 2:5-6), as indeed psalmist often did (Ps 10).

35. Or impoverished and deprived of land, forcing them to work as slaves on the land they once owned. If this is the case, the accusation in C (v. 4) is even more dramatic, and the strength with which James begins his pastoral message (v. 7ss) could become even more compelling. Underpinning this is the asyndeton that James uses in verse 6. As opposed to what certain versions suggest, he does not use a conjunction (“and”, for example) to attach one action to the other. So the strength of his conclusion is even greater, as is the escalation of things the rich have done (culminating in murder).

36. The truth is that this overturning of the situation can be seen in previous lines – and, indeed, throughout the letter; see De Souza Nogueira, “O grito”. But it is in this line where this unit, this accusation and judgement, reach their climax.

37. A *hapax legomenan* used ambiguously as “swindling” or “withholding”. Here, however, the context seems to suggest some form of permanent, not temporary, withholding. See Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, 186. With this exegete (same page), we believe that, if *af’ hymon* literally means “to you” (the plural form of “you”) and can be connected with the following term *krazei* (“cries”), the legitimate equivalent is “by you”, which naturally ties in with the verb preceding it, *apesteremenos* (“...have been withheld by you...”) and casts light on the nature of the swindling.

labourers' wages³⁸. Then, possibly to emphasise³⁹ this, James lists two cries and, in the first line, uses prosopopeia to depict the withheld wages as a powerless and hurt person crying out to God:

v. 4a... the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields... are crying out...

v. 4b... the cries of the harvesters...

The scene is striking: the reader sees the poignant image and hears the gut-wrenching cries for divine justice – (1) the wage, which conjures up Abel's blood (Gn. 4:10) as it were, and (2) the labourers. The two cries move God and lead to the climax – the condemnation and divine justice.

The Old Testament language in the second line is distinctly reminiscent of the God of the prophets. James uses a symbol and anthropomorphism to proclaim that the labourers' cry (and perhaps that of the withheld wages) has reached the ears of the Lord of Hosts (v 4b). The symbol ("has reached") and the anthropomorphism ("the ears") are James' way of categorically proclaiming that the almighty God of Justice had heard them⁴⁰. Consequently, he presents readers with a scene where the guilty no longer stand cloaked in fortune and power, but in a position they had once subjected their victims to: frail, defeated and with God against them. That way, once again, James presents an aspect of God that betrays his ideological views. God, he is saying, is powerful, compassionate and supporting. He therefore defends the destitute and embraces the cause of the poor and oppressed. He thus defends them, passing judgement on injustice and enabling liberation. Taking that a step further, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that, in James' eyes, only the Lord of Hosts holds power⁴¹, that the power of work is not to be exploited, that wealth is not to be derived from that exploitation, and that injustice will never go unpunished. James, it follows, is obviously advocating a revolutionary social and economic utopia⁴².

Before summarising the world and message underlying the text, we need to take a look at some key poetic details. The first touches upon the text's form, content and tone. The author's artistic sensitivity and genius shine through the chiasmic structure. As does his vigorous accusation and omen, in which the characters play a key role. The characters are the rich, the moths, the corroding agent, the wages, the victims (the labourers and the

38 The text, it follows, suggests that their wealth did not come from trade alone. The oppression and injustice spelled profits for some, but hunger and misery for labourers, in a society where loans were not easily available.

39 To stress the oppression and injustice even further, or to denounce a social sin rooted in this context..

40 As we know, the Old Testament title Lord of Hosts depicted God as an almighty and sovereign leader who judges his own and other people. That judgement sometimes also befell those who oppressed the poor (see Is. 5:9). By using it in this context, James seems to want to imply that the oppressed have a protector and that their protector's justice will come forth. That way, James calls to his original and present-day readers' minds the liberation story from Exodus, which began when the Lord of Hosts heard the cry of his people (Ex 3:6-7; 6:5-6); Décio José Walker and Léo Zeno Konzen, "A vossa riqueza apodreceu", *Estudos Bíblicos* 11 (1986) 110-112.

41. It is therefore understood that the poor in general do not hold any power either, even though our ideological tendencies may prompt us to see and think otherwise. The way in which these characters are recurrently depicted in the world behind the text underpins the above.

42. See Walker and Konzen, "A vossa riqueza", 120-21.

righteous), the Lord of Hosts, and James himself⁴³. All play active roles, but it is James and, especially, God, who play the central leading roles. As we have seen, James focuses on the former, the rich, when he accuses them and announces imminent judgement⁴⁴. He does that because they have selfishly amassed wealth, led an easy and reckless life, persecuted, oppressed and condemned the poor, and corrupted justice.

Their crime tries God's (and James') patience and moves them. The guilty are handed the sentence they deserve. The reader can see two poignant scenes: in one, the rich lie sentenced and hope-less, on the other, their victims lie free, and enjoying a new exodus and newfound hope. Schematically, in a past-present dynamic, this reversal looks ironic⁴⁵:

	Rich	Poor
Yesterday:	Powerful	Vulnerable
Today:	Vulnerable	Hopeful

So readers, after all, see beyond the injustice, accusation and judgement. They also see justice and solidarity in the world reflected in the text. They can also sense the critical tone of the text which, in my view, is what defines the prophetic and relevant spirit. It unsurprisingly distils the Old Testament prophets' hallmark indignation, solidarity and condemnation. Readers, therefore, ultimately see the rich as vulnerable and sentenced. And they see God and James as the voice of justice and solidarity uttering a revolutionary message: injustice will never go unpunished because the Lord of Hosts defends the grieving and destitute. But the reader sees something else, too.

A sociological reading

James' ideology, which steeps and shines through one level of this text, is that "something else" that the reader notices. This ideology is a manifestation of truth and justice. The purpose is hope and abundant life. The chiasmic structure and language help clarify that manifestation and purpose. The climax and chiasmic centre in line C (v.4) could suggest a number of things. One is that James was a militant believer driven by solidarity towards the poor in his community, who refused to conform to his day's discriminatory social system (which, we can safely assume, he knew well). His accusation and judgement against a group that lived off the fruits of oppression, and against the wealth, profit and easy life that epitomise the underlying ideology, seem to point in that direction⁴⁶. As does the Jubilee tradition (Lv 25), which not only protected the poor and destitute, and wreaked

43. As you may have noticed (and as we will discuss in more detail below), James also plays a central role. The labourers (v.4) and the righteous (v. 6) belong to the same group here, so we are dealing with them as a single character.

44. However, we know that is God's prerogative, if we believe that James (and indeed all the other writers in the Bible) is his spokesperson. The same could be argued in relation to his ideological stance as it appears in the text. It is God's stance that is embodied in James' (even though it sometimes seems at odds with God's profile).

45. Ironically, the wealth that endowed the rich with power and privileges is what brings on their tribulation, and subjects the rich to what their labourers endured. This may well substantiate what a number of authors have seen: that James's view of the rich, throughout his writings, is persistently disapproving.

46. See John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, *O Novo Testamento En Seu Ambiente Social*, translated by João Rezende Costa (São Paulo, Brasil: Paulus, 1996) 53-72.

havoc in its day's social and economic system, but also left the door ajar for a world rooted in justice, peace and abundant life⁴⁷.

It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that James' "prophetic imagination" also suggests other things, which his day's church and his contemporaries needed to hear. God's concern for the poor is something that needs to take flesh, the power of work must not be exploited, and wealth must not come from exploitation or selfish amassing. James' God of Hosts is obviously brimming over with justice and solidarity, the virtues which He has shown through His compassion and goodness through history to – among other blessings – stand alongside, succour and bring hope to the deprived, allowing them to enjoy an abundant life and hope in the future. On that account, James would conclude, nobody can equal and nobody remain unpunished, before the presence, power, justice and grace of this God. And that God is the only hope for abundant life and a better world (which are possible today, too⁴⁸).

Lastly, readers can also make out James' pallid (to say the least) view of his communities reflected in the text and underpinning his ideology. An in-depth sociological analysis of this whole letter will confirm the social and ideological tension in which they lived. On the one hand, we know they were heterogeneous communities, which counted rich members and poor ones. The former enjoyed certain privileges which James denounced and remedied (2:1-13), and the latter were humiliated, exploited and dragged to court (2:6-7). Also, this text suggests that the social system around these communities was based on an agrarian economy where workers were used unfairly. That is why, in his prophetic denunciation, James shows that he was not somebody who would conform to that social and economic system, even though neither he nor his communities had any revolutionary agenda (or enough weight to carry one out)⁴⁹. It is worth asking, as we have said, whether James's ultimate goal was to awaken his communities' critical prophetic imagination with regard to the day's social and economic system, and to the ideology sustaining it. It is also worth asking whether his ultimate goal was to urge them to embody a "proactive" ethical stance, creating a different system within the system. James may have been aware that, in that context, maintaining that identity was already a form of resistance and a viable alternative⁵⁰.

47 One contextual study of Leviticus 25 is that of René Padilla, "Vigencia del Jubileo en el mundo actual (Levítico 25)", *Textos para la Acción* 12 (1999) 40-64; see also the work of Ross and Gloria Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life* (Maryknoll, New York, USA: Orbis Book, 1999), even though the exegesis is wanting.

48 It is not good to speculate too flippantly or to impose a western political ideology or class awareness on the biblical text, especially today that the modern ideologies and social utopias that once drew and stirred the masses are now eyed askance. Though, having said that, James feasibly may have wanted to rescue his community's hope while nudging them to take a critical look at their day's unjust and despairing social and economic system.

49 Without sidestepping the debate, I believe James was writing to Jewish believers outside Palestine (see Acts 11:19). As such, they were a dispersed and marginal minority at the time. Added to that was the repression embodied in the Roman political ideology which outlawed criticism or revolution, despite the acute economic unrest (a famine in Judea) and social, political and religious uprisings which led to the 66-70 Judaic Wars, if we agree that this letter was written in the earlier days (45-48 AD). If that is true, there was not a lot one could have expected in terms of revolution or sway. Their lot was more akin to devastation, poverty, exploitation and colonialism.

50. Walker and Konzen, "A vossa Riqueza", 111, 114.

The power of the text in our context

There are parallels between the world behind James' text and his communities, and today's society, as it is an accepted fact that the world depicted in a biblical text mirrors the world today. That is why René Padilla has seen that there are patterns in the biblical text that mirror our context: "deep down, the problems that hampered human relationships in biblical times – abuse of power, the strife for material riches and exploitation of the poor – are still here today"⁵¹. It follows, therefore, that the prophetic imagination, utopia, ideology and message underlying the world behind the text can speak powerfully to us now that work relations need to be just and human.

Is that not one of the areas in which an ethical revolution is warranted today? Is it not there that a revolution needs to demystify some of our present-day idols like abuse of power and thirst for profit? Aware of what those idols can do in a social and economic system in sync with the post-modern globalisation process, Ross and Gloria Kinsler suggest that efforts to give industrial workers their dignity in this system need to be frontal, because:

In the current evolution of global production, industrial labor, including agribusiness, has been reduced largely to meaningless, repetitive performance that is rapidly being replaced by machines and robots. The most blatant form of this kind of labor is now evident in most Third World factories and in First World urban sweatshops, primarily among immigrants. The international roll call of these factories, known now by the Spanish name *maquiladoras*, is to be found on the labels of most clothing sold in the United States. We know that they are merely the logical result of a global system that presses the profit motive to its ultimate consequences⁵². (Italics are the authors').

This honing or improvement, the authors argue, stems from the politics that underpin the current economic system and paves the road for incredibly crude abuse and injustice:

These companies [the assembly plants plus, we could say, flower plantations in some Ecuadorian regions] normally maintain a tacit or declared policy prohibiting unions, so they can impose their own standards of discipline, and they hold the threat of leaving the country [or file for bankruptcy] overnight if they wish. In some cases this means that workers are allowed two three-minute bathroom stops per day, that they may have to work ten or twelve hours with no extra pay to meet order deadlines, [...] and that they must endure any abuse inflicted by bosses and administrators. Women are often subjected to sexual abuse [...] Workers may be routinely laid off prior to the deadline for formal contracts with benefits, then rehired. Salaries are kept to a minimum in order to ensure competitiveness and to maximize profit [...]. Some types of work require young, dexterous hands, between sixteen and thirty years of age, after which permanent layoff is automatic⁵³.

51. Padilla, "Vigencia del Jubileo", 41.

52. Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 135.

53. *Ibid.*, 136.

Is it not urgent, therefore, to amend work relations in the direction of the solidarity-driven and fair world imagined in the text? Is it not urgent in these relationships and in our general context to rescue human solidarity and hope for the victims of today's economic globalisation process?⁵⁴ Because of that, and because its mission is all-embracing, shouldn't the church assess this process in the light of the Word and take a stance listening to, embodying and announcing the message, ideology and utopia that James expounds? Should it not stand as a voice criticising any modern or post-modern economic determinism standing in the way of justice, solidarity, utopia and, ultimately, the hope that breathes life into this text?⁵⁵ Should it not persevere in this hope and present a proper vision of the Kingdom of God? In this new historical period, is its challenge not to push ahead in a pilgrimage of hope towards an abundant life, exposing the post-modern mechanisms which obscure the essence of social hostility, the rationale behind the new and multifarious forms of intolerance, domination, exploitation and colonialism?

(Translated by Richard Flight)

54. Which, of course, feeds on the text and matches the context. Because, as we know, the post-modern culture's view of the world, as opposed to what other writers believe, also pervades the Latin American context, not only hampering hope for any form of alternative, utopia or ideal of progress that would give a meaning to life and answer the existential questions, but that also bleeds eternal biblical values like solidarity and justice. James' view of the world, conversely, spreads a form of imagination that touches upon a hope-inspiring future towards which history is moving. It is not fiction or imagination in the sense suggested by modern ideologies and utopias.

55. That way, it would not run so much of a risk of getting trapped by indicators advocating an economic system like the one that prevails today. We know that, with mass media backing, these indicators tend to celebrate, glorify and support the ideology, depicting it as enthralling, providing opportunities for all, and indeed as the only one. That way, the church would not be so at risk of flirting with ideologies which lie outside the biblical text and sit comfortably alongside dictatorial and oppressive bureaucracies and states. Especially now that some of modernity's paradigms – such as reason in the service of domination and imperial power, and the fact that ideologies purportedly paving the road for progress and justice have instead left chaos, terror and horror in their wake – are being called into question. That way, lastly, it could deepen its commitment to creation, which national and international bodies seem totally or practically unable to help.