

THE STRUCTURE OF THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

by P. B. R. FORBES

THOSE who knew the Department of Greek in the University of Edinburgh from the 1920s to the beginning of the 1950s, whether as students or in any other way, will remember Mr. Forbes as a first-rate teacher and an unforgettable personality. The editor, who was his junior colleague for three years, from 1935 to 1938, remains in his debt to this day for fragments of Greek learning which he picked up then almost casually from a man who had the language in his bones. In his retirement Mr. Forbes maintains his interest in Greek literature, in which, of course, the New Testament writings are included.

IN Bible Guides No. 21, *The General Epistles*, pp. 16 f., Principal G. R. Beasley-Murray writes:

Is there a plan in this writing? Most critics believe that none exists outside the minds of the commentators. . . . Paragraphs are linked by catchwords, so causing the topics to be connected and developed apparently in purely accidental fashion. In 1: 1 for example "Greeting" is literally translated "*Rejoice*" and the immediately ensuing sentence begins, "Utter joy esteem it, my brothers, when you meet various trials"; verse 4 concludes with "in nothing *lacking*", verse 5 begins, "If anyone is *lacking* in wisdom"; 3: 18 closes the paragraph with a reference to those who make peace, 4: 1 asks whence wars and fightings originate.

Let me say at once that, if they are here fairly represented, those critics have been infected with the poverty of thinking that they are attributing to James. In thought, argument, exposition or whatever you like to call it, there is a semantic connection between the topics of peace and war: there is no such semantic *topical* connection in the other connections cited, between "Rejoice" and "joy", and, later, between "lacking" and "lacking": the presence or absence of plan in the composition can appear only in the topics and the treatment linked by the catchwords, if there are catchwords. The reader will have noticed that in the example of peace and war a catchword is not even alleged on the same footing as in the two previous cases.

But I need not labour the point. Presently Principal Beasley-Murray writes:

It is difficult to believe that James spoke wholly without premeditation. Dr. Newton Flew thinks James had a plan. . . . He noticed that the ten verses following the opening greeting briefly touch upon subjects which receive further treatment in the letter *and in that order*: so that verse 2 speaks of the attitude to adopt to the trials of life, and this is the subject dealt with in 1: 12-27; verses 3-4 describe the testing of *faith* as issuing in steadfastness that produces the perfect *work*, anticipating the treatment of faith and works in chapter 2; verses 5-8 treat of wisdom that God gives to those who ask, which is the subject at the heart of chapters 3-4; verses 9-11 contrast the poor and the rich, with emphasis upon the judgment facing the latter, which is the dominant theme of chapter 5.

The reader will have observed that this sketch of the hypothetical plan leaves some important points out of its consideration; and the Principal's attitude to it is non-committal:

This balancing of subjects may be coincidental; if so it is a very remarkable coincidence. I do not press the point, but at least it provides a convenient way of remembering what the letter is about!

In looking for a clue to the structure of Ep. Jac. we must, as ever, try to remember the elusive obvious: the letter was written *to be read aloud in the churches*, not only once, and, after the first reading, often (probably) in instalments: on reading aloud, cf. Col. 4: 16, I Thess. 5: 27. (How else would it easily get its sting into the bloated carcasses of the rich?) That, I am sure, is the reason why so many of these Epistles are of about the same length, including the two just cited, and expressly intended to be read aloud. In my little Testament James occupies not quite three pages in English, Colossians two and three-quarters, and I Thessalonians two and a half. I Peter and I John are almost the same as James, Galatians has exactly three pages, and Ephesians and I Timothy just a few lines more. Philippians is about two and seven-eighths pages long. The Epistles that are longer are very much longer: Hebrews is about three times as long, and II Corinthians almost the same as Hebrews, but a little shorter; the others, Romans and I Corinthians, are about four times as long as James or Galatians. It is evident that Ep. Jac. and its equals were judged to be about as much as a congregation could be asked to take in one sitting. It also seems to me not unlikely that at least some of these Epistles were deliberately so composed that they might effectively be read in two, or sometimes more, instalments, perhaps on successive Sundays. Thus Galatians, which might be a trifle long and harrowing for one sitting, can very effectively be broken into three instalments, each of two chapters. Just see how *effective* for such a purpose are the openings of the third and fifth chapters: "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you . . . ?" and, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free."

(In this latter example, "free", the last word of ch. 4, is caught up, in fact, by the first words of ch. 5, "In the liberty", or "freedom", it being the noun from the adjective just used in ch. 4.) So Ephesians, of the same slightly greater length as Galatians, goes well into three two-chapter instalments: indeed Ephesians is skilfully designed to be equally well read in two three-chapter instalments, 3: 20 and 21, a doxology, making an unsurpassable close for the first of the two instalments. The little breaks at the end of 2 and 4, with the little "fresh starts" at the opening of 3 and 5, make the other division almost as good. Similarly II Corinthians has clear halts at the end of 3; 7: 1; and 9, as well as at the end of 12: the actual last chapter, 13, is rather by way of a postscript: contrast the (I am sure, calculated) absence of any rhetorical cadence, climax, or other break at the end of 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10 or 11: if there is a break, it is only the break of a paragraph, not what I regard as an optional end of an instalment. Do you ask me to believe that all this happens accidentally?

I do not insist that these breaks were specifically or solely designed for reading aloud by instalments. I shall be content if you accept that they are of deliberate intent and design, even if the object of the design was simply the other—equally homiletic and equally important—purpose of meeting the requirements of the hearer, who, as he listens to the reader, cannot turn back, or pause to rest or think. As in a sermon, I imagine, you have to move forward steadily, stage by stage, and give him plenty of pauses from time to time.

Now let us turn to Ep. Jac. Suppose James had been writing this Epistle to read it, or have it read, into a microphone, to go out on the air. I imagine, in the ignorance of my complete inexperience, that he would write it so that it could be divided up into convenient little sections, each fairly intelligible by itself and nicely typed, as it were, on its own separate sheet, but all adding up to a coherent and integrated whole. Could I do this for you with the Epistle of James? It ought to be possible, for, in principle, that is precisely what James was aiming at; and, whatever may be the case with microphones, men's ears and minds are much the same as ever they were.

First, let me point out that James made his Epistle the right length, by the standards of his day and duty, and, moreover, with equal care divided it into two balanced, coherent, and yet, within proper limits, almost self-sufficing, instalments, rather as a clergyman does when he prepares two successive sermons on, say, the Epistle to the Romans. In Ep. Jac. chh. 1 and 2 together have 53

verses, and the second instalment, chh. 3, 4, and 5, 55 verses. The second instalment has its own head, 3: 1, "Who would be a teacher?" and a tail, naturally at the end, 5: 19, 20, "But it has great compensations". The first instalment, in the old classical manner, has the signature and address at the beginning, 1: 1; but even so, in the letter proper the first instalment has its head and its tail: 1: 2-4 at once strikes its blow for *action*, the fruit of constancy in faith, *i.e.* of unwavering faith, and the end of the instalment, 2: 26, swings the same blow in a knock-out: "For as the *body* without the *spirit* is *dead*, so *faith* without *works* is *dead also*."

The first instalment, chh. 1 and 2, 53 verses in all, consists of five almost equal sections or paragraphs.

1: 1 and 2-11;	few long verses;
1: 12-21;	no long verses;
1: 22-27;	some long;
2: 1-13;	several short, few long;
2: 14-26;	several short, few long.

The second instalment, of 55 verses, has eight sections or paragraphs, the first three being rather shorter than those before: note the skill of this shortening of these three paragraphs, so that the reader and his hearers may get a "second wind" if both instalments are read at one sitting.

3: 1 and 2-6;	several long;
3: 7-12;	some long;
3: 13-18;	one long.

Now two longer paragraphs, the first quite long, the second not so long.

4: 1-10;	one long;
4: 11-17;	one long.

Now the strain of length is relaxed, for the conclusion.

5: 1-6;	some long;
5: 7-12;	several long;
5: 13-18, and 19-20;	several long.

Now I must try to show that in the division I have put forward each section is a reasonably definite and intelligible unit in an integrated sequence of ideas.

First section: 1: 2-11. *Peirasmoi* of all sorts are to be welcomed: as tests of faith they foster our power to withstand them. But that is not enough: faith must have not only fortitude but fruit, in action: that is the way to strive to be perfect and complete Christians—ready, I think is implied, to face the Coming of Christ. If you feel you need more wisdom in righteousness, pray—in faith:

wavering is fatal to prayer, or to anything else. And let the poor man glory in his new dignity in Christ, and the rich in his abnegation of worldly advantages: for otherwise he would have been heading for damnation.

I think this is a quite satisfactory section. Trials and temptations, constancy, faith, works, wisdom in righteousness, and an already present dignity in Christ, are a good selection of the chief points in the day to day situation of the Christian, and these are good, and, for the time being, adequate comments and advice upon them. Note how the rich lead in James's thoughts of sin, as they will in the rest of the Epistle.

Second section: 1: 12-21. Withstand temptation and you will win a crown of life. You *must* stand up to it, and not seek to put the responsibility upon God, the source of all good, and only of good, and of the gospel of salvation in particular. So put off pride, anger, and vice, and in humility accept the gospel, which can save your souls.

This is a blast against the amoralist doctrine that good and evil alike come from God, so that temptation need not be resisted. Certainly if you are told to resist evil, you are entitled to *ask*, "Doesn't evil come from God, and, if not, whence comes it?" This section gives James's answer. Surely this section is reasonably complete, for its purpose; it is well rounded off with the promise of salvation with which it also began; it flows quite logically from the previous section and leads coherently to the next.

Third section: 1: 22-27. But be doers also of the gospel just mentioned, with a special watch on your tongue, in acts of compassion, and shunning the sins of the world: otherwise you will be mere hearers, having only an illusion of faith.

Next to the rich, whom we have noticed, the tongue, here and in the rest of the Epistle, has a leading place in James's thoughts of sin. This is a fairly satisfactory picture of the "doer of the word", and the section flows easily from the mention of the amoralist doctrine and its opposite in the previous section.

Fourth section: 2: 1-13. The topic of compassion is continued from the last verse of the previous section, in a diatribe against the subversion of compassion in worship of social status.

The third section preached the need for doing as well as believing. There we noted that the (unbridled) tongue received first mention in James's thoughts of violations of the doctrine he was asserting. In the fourth section he proceeds to consider another violation of it, in the sphere of compassion and unworldliness, both indicated in the last verse of the third section. When we remember

James's view of the rich as the chief of sinners, a view we must never forget in reading Ep. Jac., we shall not be surprised that they provide his next example of the negation of Christian conduct and compassion. The section is certainly not out of place, in any sense of that phrase, and it is admirably complete in its picture of "boot-licking", as it were, and in the ethical and religious analysis of its implications.

Fifth Section: 2: 14-26. Before closing the first instalment, and before closing the theme mentioned in 1: 4 and continuously discussed from 1: 22 to the present point, that theme, the need for faith to be implemented in action, is now given a fuller theological treatment. It is generally accepted that James is now deliberately and consciously controverting some errors based on a perversion of some quite sound, and to James quite acceptable, teaching of the Pauline missions to the Gentiles. Had it not been for this special motive, James could have ended his second chapter, and with it his first instalment, with verse 13, where the mention of judgment would have brought him back in full circle to 1: 4 with its latent thought of that judgment.

Before turning to the second instalment in detail, let me observe that, except for the verse 3: 9, where the name of a pagan god would have to be substituted, the passage 3: 1-13 could almost be an epideictic composition by a Greek philosopher. It is neither remarkable nor unreasonable that James, who has such skill in it, should rate the tongue so high as an engine of evil. In the scope of its power we must of course include all language, spoken or written, not forgetting the multiplication of our modern means of disseminating it. It is not merely that a warmonger would find it harder to do so much evil if language did not exist. How many of us would stick a knife into our neighbour? How many of us do *not* speak ill of him? It is so easy, and comparatively safe, to do evil with our tongue, maliciously or even unintentionally. But let us now turn to the sections of the second instalment.

Sixth section: 3: 1-6. Who would be a teacher? The power of the tongue for evil is unlimited: it is like, *inter alia*, an extinguishable fire kindled from hell.

Seventh section: 3: 7-12. It is a monster of ambivalence; its nature displays no uniformity of law.

Eighth section: 3: 13-18. True wisdom should express itself in practice, not in self-conceited controversies, anything but heavenly, and fundamentally unsound in their results. True wisdom is entirely different, in particular peaceable, and therein productive of good.

Ninth section: 4: 1-10. From strife in words he now turns for

a spell to the origin of strife in general, "wars and fightings". This passage is but a variation of 1: 14-21: compare especially 1: 19-21 and 4: 8-10. It is quite apposite in this place. When the Epistle was read in two sittings this repetition would not be noticeable.

Tenth section: 4: 11-17. Here James returns to the topic of the tongue, and deals with two forms of presumptuous speech, censoriousness and boasting of tomorrow.

Eleventh section: 5: 1-6. In his conclusion James naturally thinks of the imminent end of all things. Knowing James as we do, we should not be surprised that his first thought about Judgment Day is of the fate of the rich; cf. 1: 11. Here, as elsewhere in Ep. Jac., it is almost indisputably clear that James is writing before the crash of the corrupt Jewish theocratic regime in 70 A.D.

Twelfth section: 5: 7-12. He urges patience again, as in 1: 4, ending as he began. He adds our Lord's injunction against oaths, which he may have heard, and may easily be understood to have taken seriously. I quote F. A. Paley's note on Hesiod's *Theogony*, 231: "In fact, an oath presupposes some kind of contention. Oaths would be wholly needless if men lived in perfect amity. The Greeks especially were so prone to deceit, that nothing short of very strong inculcations of the sanctity of an oath would ensure its being kept." The point seems disconnected, but strife has been much reprobated in the letter, and care in speech was urged as recently as 5: 9. I prefer to regard it as an important saying of Jesus that simply could not be omitted, especially in thoughts of the Judgment.

Thirteenth and last section: 5: 13-20. In joy or sorrow, speak to God, in praise or prayer respectively. There is one previous mention of prayer, at the beginning, 1: 5-7: now James at his close comes round to it again. Then, having finished his advice, he returns to the thought with which he opened this second instalment, that of the teacher. "Who would be a teacher?" he began. "But", he concludes, "it has great compensations".

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