

## **James 5:1-6 — An NT Imprecation Against Injustice**

O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us!  
Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock! (Ps 137:8-9 — ESV)

### INTRODUCTION

The motif of wealth and poverty has occupied the attention of Liberation theologians, and is in fact their central dogma through which all of theology and life is seen and interpreted.<sup>1</sup> God is seen as the advocate of the poor, and He personally opposes the capitalist rich. In this light, the passage of James 5: 1-6, among other texts in James, is seen to function as a prophetic denunciation of the evil and rich bourgeois who oppress the poor, and as a call for us to take up the cause of the poor.<sup>2</sup> Given the fact that Liberation Theology arose from more liberal circles, the conservative temptation is to ignore the force of what this text actually teaches, as “we know” that Marxism is unbiblical and therefore there is no denunciation of the rich in this passage in any sense.<sup>3</sup> The question that we have to address however is what this passage actually teaches, and thus we should not let our ideological preferences cloud our exegesis.

In this paper, I will be looking at the passage of James 5:1-6. It is my contention that James 5:1-6 is a New Testament imprecatory passage that prophetically denounces injustice and proclaims the eschatological judgment of God. The theme of

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (trans. Paul Burns; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), 2-4; Kenneth Hamilton, “Liberation Theology: An Overview,” in Carl E. Armerding, ed., *Evangelicals and Liberation* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1977), 8

<sup>2</sup> Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James* (Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books, 1987; Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 1987), 81; Patrick J. Hartin, “Exegesis and Proclamation: ‘Come now, you rich, weep and wail...’ (James 5:1-6),” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 84 S (1993): 63

<sup>3</sup> This warning is sounded in Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (PNTC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 36

wealth and poverty is indeed important in the book of James.<sup>4</sup> However, while Liberation Theology is right in seeing the denunciation of the rich in this passage, it reads the rich/ poor motif acontextually out of the redemptive historical nature of Scripture, and instead reads it in light of their Marxist and neo-Marxist theme of social justice.

I will first look at the history of interpreting this passage, and then define the pericope. Next, I will explicate my thesis by looking at the various themes of this passage. Firstly, the theme of injustice and the prophetic denunciation of injustice will be looked at. The focus of the passage will be seen to be not so much on the contrast between rich and poor, but rather between justice and injustice. Secondly, we will see that this passage calls for and looks towards the eschatological judgment of God, looking at the idea of the righteous man as one resolution of this eschatological judgment. Thirdly, this passage is to be seen as an imprecation functioning in the same way as an Old Testament imprecation, as a proclamation of God's judgment over all injustice when He comes again.

## HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

In the early church, James 5: 1-6 has been interpreted as a condemnation of the rich, with a focus on the unrighteous rich. Oecumenius wrote that the passage is against the wealthy whose "possession of wealth and their stinginess" are made "a source of

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<sup>4</sup> See Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982), 41-7; Ralph P. Martin, *James* (WBC 48; Waco, Tex.:1988), lxxxiv-lxxxvi; Martin Dibelius, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (rev. Heinrich Greeven; trans. Michael A. Williams; ed. Hemut Koester; Hermeneia; Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1976), 39-45; Moo, 35-6

lamentation,” as opposed to the person who gives his wealth to the poor.<sup>5</sup> Concerning verse 4, Bede wrote that it speaks of the wickedness of those who “not only refuse to share their wealth with the poor and needy,” but “refuse to pay their workers the wages which are due to them.”<sup>6</sup> Theophylact interprets it as a digression directed against the Jewish leaders who “robbed the poor and covered themselves with all manner of riches.”<sup>7</sup> Caesarius of Arles says that this text calls us to be “willing to dispense” alms “more generously”, while Chrysostom states that James condemned luxury and thus we are to live in moderation.<sup>8</sup> The righteous man in verse 6 is interpreted by Theophylact to refer to Christ, but it nevertheless “include others who suffered at the hands of the Jews,” even that James might have been “speaking prophetically about his own approaching death.”<sup>9</sup>

In the Reformation era, John Calvin interpreted this passage as condemning not all of the rich, but only those rich who “delight in pomp and luxury,” and “prefer to heap up riches rather than to employ them for necessary purposes.”<sup>10</sup> Matthew Henry on the other hand interpreted the passage as condemning sinners who commit the sins of covetousness, oppression, sensuality and voluptuousness, and persecution.<sup>11</sup>

## PERICOPE

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<sup>5</sup> Gerald Bray, ed. *James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude* (ACC New Testament XI; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 54

<sup>6</sup> Bray, ACC NT11, 55

<sup>7</sup> Bray, ACC NT11, 55

<sup>8</sup> Bray, ACC NT11, 55

<sup>9</sup> Bray, ACC NT11, 55

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (trans. and ed. John Owen; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1948), 344

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Henry, *Acts to Revelation* (Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible Vol. VI; Mclean, Va.: MacDonald Publishing, n.d.), 995

James 5:1-6 makes up one pericope. Some commentaries however link it with the previous passage in James 4, with the Anchor Bible connecting it with James 4:11-17 under the heading “Examples of Arrogance,” while others link it to James 4:13-17.<sup>12</sup>

James 4:13 begins with the phrase “Come now” (Ἄγε νῦν), the same phrase that begins James 5:1. Therefore, while there is an obvious linkage between James 4:13-17 and James 5:1-6, it is better to see them as separate pericopes that are nonetheless similar and connected.

## INJUSTICE

The theme of wealth and poverty runs through James, and it is especially seen in this passage. The “rich” (οἱ πλούσιοι), however they are to be interpreted, are condemned (Jas. 5: 1). What are the crimes these rich are said to have committed?

In James 5:3b-6, we can see the crimes of the rich. First, in verse 3b, the rich stored up treasure for themselves in the last days. This harkens to the parable Jesus had told of the rich fool in Luke 12:16-21, who is covetous and not rich towards God. The rich are thus guilty of the sin of covetousness.

Secondly in verse 4, they have defrauded (ὁ ἀπεστερημένος) and did not pay the wages of the workers who mowed their fields.<sup>13</sup> These workers are day workers who

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<sup>12</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (Anchor Bible 37A; New York, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1995), 291-310. Other commentaries that link it to James 4:13-17 include Dibelius, 230-240, who sees this as a group of sayings against worldly-minded merchants and rich people, and Dan G. McCartney, *James* (ECNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2009), 223-230, who sees them as oracles of warning.

<sup>13</sup> The word ἀπεστερημένος is written as ἀφουστερημένος in κ and B\*. The chosen reading has the support of A, B<sup>2</sup>, Ψ, Byz, and many miniscules. The present tense form ἀποστερημένος is mainly found in K and L. The present tense form can be discounted due to the paucity of textual support. According to Bruce Metzger, the reading ἀπεστερημένος appears to be the earliest reading “which copyists emended to a more familiar word” [Bruce Metzger and United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament*

hire themselves out during the day to work for each day's food, probably small time farmers farming the rural estate farms (χώρα) of a rich absentee landowner who had swallowed up their farms.<sup>14</sup> These workers were therefore dependent upon the day's wages for their daily provision. Defrauding these workers of their wages would likely mean that they would go hungry, and such an action is a violation of the Mosaic Law in Leviticus 19:13.<sup>15</sup>

Thirdly, these rich are stated as living lavishly (ἐτρυφήσατε) and indulgently (ἐσπαταλήσατε). The life of luxury is one of enjoyment of the good things in life, and the contrast drawn is between the rich enjoying good things while the workers mentioned in the previous verse are going hungry.<sup>16</sup> Living indulgently (σπαταλάω) on the other hand has a more pejorative meaning and refers to wanton indulging of the desires of the flesh.<sup>17</sup> Such indulging in fleshly desires is sin, and this sin is even more damning when looked at in contrast with the plight of the workers.<sup>18</sup>

Fourthly in verse 6, these rich have condemned (κατεδικάσατε) and murdered the righteous person. Such a condemnation is a judicial condemnation and conjures up the image of the rich charging the poor in a law court.<sup>19</sup> Following from the defrauding of the poor, the charging of the poor in a law court and his condemnation is a double travesty

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(4th Rev. Ed.) (London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 614]. That may be the case, although there is little difference in meaning between the two in this context (ἀφυστερέω — withhold; ἀποστερέω — defraud).

<sup>14</sup> Martin, WBC 48, 178; David, NIGTC, 177; Maynard-Reid, 85-92; Dieter Sanger, "χώρα, ας, ή," (EDNT 3: 491); c.f. Jesus' parable in Matt 20:1-16

<sup>15</sup> Also stated in the Apocrypha in Sir 34:22, where James is probably picking up the language of the one defrauding the workers (ὁ ἀποστερῶν)

<sup>16</sup> The word τρυφάω is neutral and has positive connotations in Neh 9:25 and Isa 66:11 in the LXX.

<sup>17</sup> Davids, NIGTC, 178; Moo, PNTC, 217; c.f. 1 Tim 5:6; Ezek 16:49 (LXX)

<sup>18</sup> "...to indulge in luxury with those stolen wages is doubly offensive" (McCartney, ECNT, 235)

<sup>19</sup> Gottlob Schrenk, "καταδικάζω, καταδίκη" (TDNT 3:621-2)

of justice, whereby the rich “use their wealth and influence to deprive the righteous poor of their rights and of their living.”<sup>20</sup>

The crimes having been delineated, there are three interrelated questions to deal with: Who are “the rich”? Who are “the poor”? What is the fundamental nature of the crimes committed?

We first note that whoever the “rich” refer to, it cannot refer to all peoples who are rich. The Scriptures commend the gaining of wealth as the blessing of God (Prov 10: 4, 15) and one of the blessings for those who follow wisdom is wealth (Prov 8: 18). Abraham was a rich man, and so were Job and many of the patriarchs, and they are approved by God. Riches by itself therefore cannot be a vice, and those who are materially rich are not necessarily evil people. In 1 Timothy 6:10, it is the love of money that is considered the root of all manner of evil, not money per se.

So who are “the rich” and who are “the poor”? Sociological conditions in the first century AD show us that the majority of people in Syro-Palestine during that time were materially poor. Prior to that, the post-exilic period saw the weakness and poverty of the people of God compared with the might of the Gentile nations, and thus the linkage of God’s people with the poor developed.<sup>21</sup> In the Roman era, the *Pax Romana* benefitted many foreign entrepreneur businessmen who came into places like Palestine and gathered great wealth at the expense of the indigenous population, whose economic

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<sup>20</sup> Moo, PNTC, 219. Scott McKnight claims that “the image of the powerful oppressing the powerless is so common that we should not assume that it refers to a literal courtroom.” [Scott McKnight, *The Letter of James* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011), 396]. However, the term itself is judicial, so while a literal court may not be in view, the judicial pronouncement of the rich acting as judge and executor is in view.

<sup>21</sup> Dibelius, *Hermeneia*, 39

situation became increasingly worse.<sup>22</sup> Against this sociological backdrop, “the rich” are therefore strongly, but not exactly, correlated with those who are not God’s people and who economically exploit God’s people.

Biblically, the time of the prophets in the late divided monarchial period saw the linking of the rich with unrighteousness. Isaiah 5:7-8 speaks of the unrighteous actions the rich commit. The poor thus become largely associated with the righteous in the Psalms and the prophetic literature, since they become poor through the unrighteous actions the rich undertake.<sup>23</sup>

The “rich” therefore in James’ sociological and theological context are those materially rich people who commit unrighteous acts. The “poor” are God’s people who are economically exploited. There is therefore both a spiritual/ moral dimension and an economic dimension to the rich/ poor contrast as used by James, and the latter should not be diminished or spiritualized away.

Looking at it on the spiritual/moral dimension, we should see that the focus of the rich/poor contrast is not so much on wealth or the lack of it but rather on the unjust way such wealth is acquired. Wealth after all is one of the blessings promised for obedience under the Mosaic Covenant (Deut 28:11-12). In Isaiah 1: 4, the main sin of Israel is that of forsaking God, and it is because of that sin that all the other sins follow. The fundamental nature of these crimes by the rich therefore is sin against God and His Law and breaking His covenant, not mere socio-economic exploitation. That the poor are not inherently and necessarily righteous can be seen in places like Jeremiah 5:4. Putting all

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<sup>22</sup> Maynard-Reid, *Poverty*, 13-18

<sup>23</sup> For example Ps 10; 37:8-17; 72:2, 4; Isa 29:19 (Moo, PNTC 35)

these together, the main focus in James is that of sin, and of justice and injustice manifested in obedience or disobedience to God's Law. Thus, it is what the rich do wickedly that condemns them, as the actions described in James 5:3-6 show— not what the rich have.

Liberation Theology is therefore in error when it sees the theme especially of material wealth and poverty as ultimate instead of penultimate themes in the Scriptures.<sup>24</sup> They err in thinking that God is necessarily always on the side of the poor. They err also in thinking that the rich can only become rich through exploitation of the poor.<sup>25</sup> Lastly, they err in not seeing the fundamental problem of sin and thus the necessity of true liberation from the power and dominion of sin.<sup>26</sup>

James is therefore against the rich for what they do wickedly, not what they have. We are certainly to help the poor, yet that is not the main focus of Scripture or any passage in James.<sup>27</sup>

## PROPHETIC DENUNCIATION OF INJUSTICE

James 5:1 begins with the phrase ἄγε νῦν. This phrase is an abrupt phrase that is more in line with prophetic proclamation.<sup>28</sup> The phrase is also used to begin the earlier passage of James 4:13-17 and thus may seem to be a call to dialogue and reason.

<sup>24</sup> Thus Patrick Hartin is wrong in calling a concern for social concern as being the essence of Christian religion (Hartin, "Exegesis," 63). Also in error is Maynard-Reid (Maynard-Reid, *Poverty*, 98)

<sup>25</sup> Here, Liberation Theologians are in error in their economic theory, as it is argued in Humberto Belli & Ronald Nash, *Beyond Liberation Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1992), 93-114

<sup>26</sup> Belli & Nash, *Liberation*, 63-5

<sup>27</sup> Thus, the so called third option floated by George Peck is still too focused on economic disparity instead of obedience to God's laws [George Pick, "James 5:1-6," *Interpretation* 42 no. 3 (1988): 296]. Moreover, in desiring to help the poor, Liberation Theology and her ideological daughters have a flawed view of economics and how the poor can be helped (Belli & Nash, *Liberation*, 59-61).

<sup>28</sup> Davids, NIGTC, 175; McKnight, NICNT, 381; Dibelius, Hermeneia, 235; Martin, WBC 48, 175; Maynard-Reid, 70, 81. As opposed to the NEB's translation of the phrase in James 5:1 as "Next a word to you," James "is delivering a denunciation in the style of a prophetic diatribe—not a friendly dialogue at all" (Maynard-Reid, *Poverty*, 70).

However, a call to reason is not necessarily a call to dialogue but rather can function as a unilateral summons. Such can be seen in Isaiah 1:18 in the Septuagint, which, although it uses a different Greek phrase (καὶ δεῦτε), has the same sense of meaning of the prophetic idiom.

The first thing that must be asked here is whether the rich that James is addressing include those within the church. Scott McKnight sees the three pericopes of James 4:13-17, James 5:1-6 and James 5:7-11 as speaking about the relations of the messianic community and the wealthy.<sup>29</sup> Peter Davids however sees correctly that James 4:13-17 and our passage James 5:1-6 are two sides of the same coin, although he wrongly sees this as speaking of the testing of the believing community.<sup>30</sup> It is better to see our pericope as the prophetic proclamation against the unrighteous rich, while James 4:13-17 is the prophetic proclamation of warning people in general regarding the temptation of riches. Such being the case, our pericope focuses on the rich as a group that is corporately outside the church, although the possibility of the individual presence of some of these rich plutocrats within the visible church is not excluded.

In the tradition of the prophets therefore, our passage is a proclamation of condemnation and judgment against the rich as a group for their wickedness. For their crimes against God and His Law, they are denounced sharply. They are called to cry (κλαύσατε) in the sense of wailing (ὀλολύζοντες) because their eschatological distress (ταῖς τάλαιπωρίας) is coming.<sup>31</sup> The term used here for wailing (ὀλολύζω), an onomatopoeic term, is a New Testament *hapax legomenon* and is used in the

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<sup>29</sup> McKnight, NICNT, viii

<sup>30</sup> Davids, NIGTC, 171

<sup>31</sup> The participle ὀλολύζοντες is interpreted as indicating an adverbial of manner [Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996 ), 627-8]

Septuagint only in the prophetic literature.<sup>32</sup> As used in the prophetic literature, it is the cry of dread and horror when God comes to judge. The term for distress (*ταλαιπωρία*) refers to the eschatological ruin and misery that will come upon men at the judgment.<sup>33</sup> Both of these terms show forth the prophetic nature of the denunciation and the prophetic proclamation of doom, calling for nothing less than the advent of the Final Judgment.

The prophetic word is a covenantal lawsuit by the prophet of God against Man.<sup>34</sup> It is therefore not so much about invectives and curses uttered by the oppressed against their oppressors, and the vocalization of their wish that God will vindicate them from these wicked men. Rather, God Himself is the Judge and the Plaintiff against the defendants. That the prophetic denunciation in our passage is a covenant lawsuit can be seen in the fact that there is the calling of inanimate objects as witnesses against the defendants. Just as in the lawsuit against Israel God calls heaven and earth as witnesses against Israel (Deut 4:26, 30:19), so here in our passage in verse 3 the corrosion of the rich men's wealth will be used to testify (*εἰς μαρτύριον*) against them.

Here we see a twist in the traditional covenant lawsuit formula. God called creation to testify against Israel. Yet in God's lawsuit against the rich, He called forth as witness the misuse of creation to witness against them. Such a difference brings us back to the creation mandate where Man is called to have dominion over all things (Gen 1:28). Israel was under a special revelation and national covenant and so nature was called as witnesses. The rich however as a group are either mixed or mostly

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<sup>32</sup> Hans Wolfgang Heidland, "ὄλολύζω," (*TDNT* 5:173)

<sup>33</sup> Benedikt Schwank, "ταῖς ταλαιπωρίαις" (*EDNT* 3:332)

<sup>34</sup> Herbert B. Huffmon, "The Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets," *JBL* 78 no. 4 (1959): 285-95

unbelievers, and thus are judged under the creation covenant (Rom 2:12), wherein the things that Man are to exercise dominion over will testify either for or against them.

Verse 4 shows the wages of the workers crying out against the rich. The Greek word for cries (*αἱ βοαί*), another New Testament *hapax legomenon*, mentioned here is often used in the Septuagint of God's people when they plead with God for deliverance from danger and for justice.<sup>35</sup> So on the one hand we have this anguished cry for God's justice, and on the other hand the prophetic idiom speaks of the unpaid wages crying out against the rich. Just as the corroded wealth testified against the rich through their misuse, so also the unpaid wages as inanimate things similarly testify against the rich as a misuse of created things. According to the Mosaic Law, by two witnesses shall a charge be established (Deut 19:15). The Lord thus puts forwards these two witnesses to indict the rich for their sins.

The cries of the workers have reached the ears of the Lord of Hosts, or literally YHWH Sabaoth from the Hebrew.<sup>36</sup> This title brings to mind God as the Almighty One who "hears the pleas of the poor" and "comes to their rescue."<sup>37</sup> Greater than this however is that the title shows God "determined to judge those who infringe his commandments."<sup>38</sup> The injustice committed by the rich has resulted in God's covenant lawsuit against the rich, with Him being the Lord of the heavenly armies who will fight on the behalf of His (poor) people. James in the spirit of the prophets denounced such

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<sup>35</sup> Moo, PNTC, 216

<sup>36</sup> הַיְהוָה צְבָאוֹת

<sup>37</sup> Martin, WBC 48, 179; Maynard-Reid, 84-5; McCartney, ECNT, 234; Dibelius, Hermeneia, 238. C.f. Isa 5:9 in the LXX (ἠκούσθη γὰρ εἰς τὰ ὄτα κυρίου σαβαωθ...)

<sup>38</sup> Moo, PNTC, 217. The title is deemed so important for James that he transliterated the Hebrew הַיְהוָה צְבָאוֹת into the Greek here, instead of translating it, which is what occurs in the Septuagint in places like Isa 5:9.

injustice in God's name and authority, and calls God's eschatological judgment upon the rich.

## ESCHATOLOGICAL JUDGMENT

The issue of the last days in verse 3 brings to mind the eschatological judgment that awaits the wicked rich. Having denounced the rich for their wickedness, James pronounced the judgment that awaits them.

We have seen that the cries of the defrauded workers have reached the ears of YHWH Sabaoth. The LORD of hosts is also the one that brings about the eschatological judgment.<sup>39</sup> Such an eschatological day of judgment will arrive in the enigmatically named "day of slaughter" (ἡμέρα σφαγῆς) in verse 5.

The first century was a time of much apocalyptic speculation.<sup>40</sup> The pseudepigraphical works of 1 Enoch and the book of Jubilees for example came into being around this period of eschatological expectation. In this climate, James proclaimed the prophetic message of the coming day of slaughter, a day prophesied by Jeremiah in Jeremiah 12:3 as the Day of Judgment, and developed upon in the apocalyptic imagery of his era picturing the same.<sup>41</sup> This day of slaughter is God's Day of Judgment to slaughter the wicked and save God's people. In light of the association

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<sup>39</sup> Moo, PNTC, 217

<sup>40</sup> Dibelius, *Hermeneia*, 42

<sup>41</sup> Martin, WBC 48, 180; Davids, NIGTC, 179; 1 Enoch 94:9 c.f. 1 Enoch 99:15; Jub. 36:9-10; 2 Enoch 50:5. Martin Dibelius disagrees, claiming that "every solemn day does not have to be the Day of Judgment," and thus "the day of slaughter" could also mean any day of disaster upon which things turned out terribly only for the poor" (Dibelius, 239). Against Dibelius, it is maintained that the scriptural reference in the Old Testament prophetic book in Jeremiah 12:3 provides the necessary backdrop to understand James' view of what constitutes the "day of slaughter."

The difference of prepositions of Jeremiah 12:3 from James 5:5, εἰς as compared to ἐν, while not insignificant, does not alter the character of just what the "day of slaughter" refers to.

of the rich with the wicked at that time, the rich are likened unto the calf that is fattened for a meal.<sup>42</sup> All of their wealth are thus like the food fed to the fattened calf—the more wealth they have, the better and greater fuel they are for burning in hell.

The question now is whether James is proclaiming the eschatological Day of the Lord, or the Day of Slaughter, as occurring now. Such would seem to be the case with the usage of the aorist tense form for “feeding” in verse 5 (ἐθρέψατε). Thus, there is a variant of the text in verse 5 with the insertion of ὡς before the “day of slaughter,” to make the day of slaughter decidedly in the future.<sup>43</sup> However, seeing this as part of the prophetic genre solves the problem immediately without the need to insert anything into the text. The Day of Slaughter is spoken of as it is in the past, because the reality is already certain. Thus, “the death-knell of the rich has already sounded,” even though the Day of Judgment itself is still in the future.<sup>44</sup>

So what are the exact consequences the rich suffer? Verses 2-3 describe what happened to the wealth of the rich by looking at their wealth generically, at their clothes, and at their gold and silver. Their wealth have rotten (σέσηπεν), clothes have become eaten by moths (σητόβρωτα γέγονεν), and their gold and silver have corroded away (κατίωται). The focus here is on the falling apart of their riches in which they have hoped in. The destruction of their riches even extends to the destruction of what seems indestructible like gold or silver, with James not making a scientific but a poetic and

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<sup>42</sup> Ψ and a few other manuscripts have σάρκας in place of καρδίας in verse 5. There is insufficient textual evidence for this variant. Rather it seems that the variant is an attempt to make the meaning more explicit

<sup>43</sup> Texts with the added ὡς are κ<sup>2</sup>, Ψ, the Syriac, the Majority Text and some minuscules. The chosen text is supported by κ\*, A, B, P and other minuscules. The manuscript evidence favors the chosen text, with the addition as an emendation to the text to solve a perceived theological problem.

<sup>44</sup> Martin, WBC 48, 180

proverbial statement here. What is spoken of focuses on the transience of the wealth of the rich by describing the falling apart of the traditional symbols of wealth.<sup>45</sup>

Along with the falling apart of their wealth comes the part this wealth plays in condemning the rich before God. In verse 3, we see that the “rust” (ὁ ἰὸς) of their gold and silver will testify against them. Furthermore, this testimony will be the clear basis for their punishment in hell, where their flesh will be burned with fire.<sup>46</sup>

The eschatological judgment against the rich therefore is proclaimed as certain now, while the day of slaughter itself awaits in the future. Yet there is one alternative resolution for this eschatological judgment already present, which we can see in the theme of the righteous person in James 5:6.

#### THE RIGHTEOUS PERSON

In James 5:6, there is a shift from the plural form to the singular. The rich have condemned and murdered the righteous person. This righteous person, singular, does not resist these rich. The question is: Who is this righteous person, and what does it mean for him to not resist the rich?

The first thing to address is whether the statement on resisting is a statement in the indicative, or a question in the imperative. Is it “he does not resist you,” or “does he

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<sup>45</sup> Davids, NIGTC, 175-6

<sup>46</sup> The subject of what is eating the flesh with fire is ambiguous. A textual variant adds ὁ ἰὸς after φάγεται τὰς σάρκας, which is supported by  $\kappa^2$ , A, P,  $\Psi$  and a couple of miniscules. It is however easily seen as a later emendation to clarify what they think is the original meaning. A better interpretation is to see it as what the testimony of the rusting gold and silver represents, which is the fire that is kindled because of the testimony of these misused gifts. The rust or the testimony there functions as a metonymy for the cause of the punishment the rich suffer. See Davids, NIGTC, 176

not resist you?”<sup>47</sup> Both are legitimate readings of the phrase in Greek. One of the arguments for it being a question is the fact that in this phrase we can see the only present tense verb (*ἀντιτάσσεται*) here in this particular pericope, and thus it is the only action that is “occurring now.”<sup>48</sup> The problem with such an argument is that it assumes that there are no other good reasons why a present tense verb is used if the statement is meant to be read as a simple indicative. In fact, if it expresses the cries of the righteous for vindication, we should expect the future tense to be used.<sup>49</sup> It is therefore better to treat this present tense as a simple indicative fact of the helplessness of the poor, who do not resist because they cannot resist the rich.<sup>50</sup>

Who is this righteous person then? Martin Dibelius argued that the charge of condemning and murdering the righteous person is meant to be a “general accusation” and not a “reference to a specific instance.”<sup>51</sup> This however makes the entire shift from the plural to the singular inexplicable. Another possibility that is floated sees the righteous person as a collective symbol of righteousness.<sup>52</sup> Such is indeed a more plausible possibility. However, if we see the righteous as a collective singular, then surely the epitome of righteousness is seen in Jesus Christ the righteous one (Isa 53:11, 1 John 2:1), who was condemned and murdered by the unrighteous Sanhedrin and did not resist them at all.

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<sup>47</sup> Commentaries who take the position that it is a question include Davids, NIGTC, 180, and McKnight, NICNT, 399-400

<sup>48</sup> McKnight, 400

<sup>49</sup> Moo, PNTC, 220

<sup>50</sup> Martin, WBC 48, 181

<sup>51</sup> Dibelius, *Hermeneia*, 239.

<sup>52</sup> John Bryon, “Living in the Shadow of Cain: Echoes of a Developing Tradition in James 5:1-6,” *Novum Testamentum* 48 no. 3 (2006): 261; Martin, WBC 48, 182

The representative view of the collective singular therefore must be seen as one with its chief exemplar being Jesus Christ. The righteous one refers to Jesus first and foremost, and then believers as they are persecuted and killed by the wicked (Acts 7:52), starting from Abel to Zachariah (Luke 11:51) down through redemptive-history. The wickedness of the rich therefore has as its summit the murder of Jesus, which epitomizes the ideal of the righteous man who was condemned unjustly, murdered and yet did not resist.

In the unjust death of Jesus however lies the way of salvation. For what Jesus endured on the cross was the wrath of God for the sins of the world. The eschatological judgment of God pronounced in this prophetic word by James can be reversed only through faith in Christ. Therefore, the prophetic word of doom is not without hope, for there is another way we can avoid damnation.

#### NT IMPRECATION

James 5:1-6 prophetically denounces injustice and proclaims the coming eschatological judgment. Yet in this, it follows the pattern of an imprecation, the calling of curses upon the enemies of God as judgment for their wickedness.<sup>53</sup>

As God's Word, our passage is not merely James' personal denunciation of the rich. It is James functioning as a prophet proclaiming God's judgment over the wicked rich. It is paralleled by Psalms 137, an imprecatory psalm. Like it, James 5:1-6 proclaims severe judgment upon the wicked, albeit in slightly less personal tones.

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<sup>53</sup> James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1991), 21

Those who oppose God and persecute God's people are targets of imprecation, and the objects of divine hatred leading to damnation at the last day.

Yet, there is a way opened up to escape the eschatological judgment, through the death of the righteous one, Jesus Christ. The curses and pronouncements of doom can be removed through faith in Christ, as Christ absorbed the curses upon himself (Gal 3:13).

Looked more deeply, we will see that all of us were to be seen as one of the rich, for all of us who sinned in Adam are responsible for Christ's death. We were focused on ourselves, using our possessions for our own pleasures, exploiting others for our own benefit, just like the rich are accused of in James 5:1-6. Our sins crucified the Lord of glory, and we had all rejected God and Christ prior to the Holy Spirit working faith in our hearts. Just like the rich, the prophetic pronouncement of doom had hung over our heads, and only those of us who believe in Christ now have the sentence of eschatological judgment removed by Christ.

## CONCLUSION

James 5:1-6 seems to Liberation theologians to be a simple passage denouncing the rich capitalists in favor of the poor. Yet, such is an extremely superficial reading of the text. No doubt God is against the rich exploiting the poor. Yet it is one thing to say that God is against exploitation of the poor, and another thing to say that God is against the rich.

As it has been seen, the focus of the text is not so much on socio-economic issues and class struggles, but on justice and injustice, obedience and disobedience to

God's commandments. The rich in James 5:1-6 have violated God's Law over and over again, and have oppressed God's people. The prophetic denunciation therefore has a God-ward focus against the sins of these rich people, and the prophetic proclamation of doom fore-tells the certain eschatological judgment to come. The passage therefore, far from being about social justice, is an imprecation against all who violate God's law, and thus by extension, against all who remain in their sins.

How are we to respond to this text? We are to respond it with faith and obedience to God's commands. Exploitation of the poor is merely a subset of the violation of God's moral law, and attention must be paid to all of the law, not the parts that we happen to like. If the main issue here is injustice as a violation of God's law, ironically it is the Liberation theologians who are indicted just as the rich in James are, for they violate God's Law. Furthermore, by promoting measures such as unjust taxation, they are oppressing those they deem as the rich in order to correct inequalities real or imagined, and thus they violate God's command about the need for just weights and measures (Lev 19:36).

God's Word stands above all of us, and we have to submit to its decrees and statutes. True liberation comes through faith in Christ. Let us therefore focus on that, and so escape from the curses we deserve because of our sins. Amen.

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