

A Proverb Performance Study of James 1:19

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Abstract: *While in the last two decades or so orality and performance have entered the mainstream of biblical studies, the genre of wisdom literature, specifically the proverb, has remained largely unexplored from these perspectives. This essay will address this omission, by looking at the proverbial statements in the New Testament through the lens of orality and performance—specifically the maxim in Jas 1:19. The essay will first, label James’s genre as an oral paraenesis written in epistolary form. Second, the essay will describe the nature of a proverb performance and demonstrate how Jas 1:19 can be classified accordingly. Third, the essay will investigate the introduction to the proverbial statement in Jas 1:19, asserting the statement’s traditional nature, and explaining its meaning in its literary context. Finally, the essay will examine the proverb’s strategic value for the author, including the authoritative force derived from the saying’s performance, traditional nature, and oral aesthetics. The analysis of Jas 1:19 through the lens of orality and performance will highlight the value of this methodology, demonstrating that there is not only value in what James says but in how he says it.*

Key Words: *Epistle of James, orality, performance criticism, proverb performance, Proverbs*

While in the last two decades or so orality and performance have entered the mainstream of biblical studies, the genre of wisdom literature, specifically the proverb, has remained largely unexplored from these perspectives.¹ To address this omission, I intend to draw attention to the

* I am grateful for the comments and suggestions received from the anonymous reviewers for *STR*.

¹ Some scholars who have concentrated on performance or orality in the biblical wisdom genre are: Thomas McCreech, *Biblical Sound and Sense: Poetic Sound Patterns in Proverbs 10–29*, JSOTSup 128 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991); Carole R. Fontaine, *Smooth Words: Women, Proverbs, and Performance in Biblical Wisdom*, JSOTSup 356 (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 160–61; Gary A. Rendsburg, “Literary and Linguistic Matters in the Book of Proverbs,” in *Perspectives on Israelite Wisdom: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Jarick (New

value of looking at the proverbial statements in the New Testament through the lens of orality and performance—specifically I will examine the maxim in Jas 1:19. In part, I am concerned with determining the ancient understanding of the authoritative force of the words in this text. I will proceed in four steps. First, I will label James’s genre as an oral paraenesis written in epistolary form. Second, I will describe the nature of a proverb performance and demonstrate how Jas 1:19 can be classified accordingly. Third, I will investigate the introduction to the proverbial statement in Jas 1:19, assert the statement’s traditional nature, and explain its meaning in its literary context. Finally, I will examine the proverb’s strategic value for the author, including the authoritative force derived from the saying’s performance, traditional nature, and oral aesthetics.

Genre: An Oral Epistolary Paraenesis

James is written in a gnomic and proverbial style, offering moral instruction while employing a strong hortatory tone like the content and style of Old Testament wisdom literature. Given that fifty-four of James’s 108 verses contain imperatives, the work can appropriately be labeled as paraenesis.² However, there is significant similarity in the general characteristics of the subgenre of paraenesis and wisdom literature. Both contain imperatives and aphorisms.³ Luke Cheung argues that the vocabulary characteristic of paraenesis is found lacking in James and certain features in James such as the use of aphorisms as confirmatory summary and the subject matter of James can only be found in wisdom instruction, leading Cheung to identify James as wisdom instruction.⁴ Yet he acknowledges that James shows formal features of both Hellenistic paraenesis and Jew-

York: T&T Clark, 2018), 113; J. J. Burden, “Decision by Debate: Examples of Popular Proverb Performance in the Book of Job,” *OTE* 4 (1991): 37–65; Kathryn Pfisterer Darr, “Asking at Abel: A Wise Woman’s Proverb Performance in 2 Samuel 20,” in *From the Margins 1: Women of the Hebrew Bible and Their Afterlives*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh C. Stahlberg, *Bible in the Modern World* 18 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 102–21; Alan P. Winton, *The Proverbs of Jesus: Issues of History and Rhetoric*, JSNTSup 35 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990), esp. ch. 5.

² Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Epistle of James*, ICC (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 72. For other suggested genre classifications see pp. 72–76.

³ Luke Cheung, *Genre, Composition, and Hermeneutics of the Epistle of James*, Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2003; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 37.

⁴ Cheung, *Genre, Composition, and Hermeneutics*, 15–52.

ish wisdom instruction. Richard Bauckham identifies James as a “paraenetic official letter or “paraenetic encyclical.”⁵ Bauckham refers to Jas 1:19b–20 as a wisdom admonition with a motive clause.⁶

James includes an opening form characteristic of an epistolary salutation but does not disclose any information about the sender with the exception of his name, “James,” and the designation “servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1).⁷ While James is addressed to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion (1:1), the work does not contain an extended greeting nor does it have any closing formula typical of ancient letters. However, Thomas Winger has suggested that certain epistles like James, which end abruptly, not having the usual blessings and greetings or closing formulas, might assume that the lector and congregation will do these rituals on their own, according to the liturgical custom of their congregation.⁸

In addition to its classification as epistolary paraenesis literature, James provides many clues indicating that it was situated in and written for a primarily oral culture. The first-century Mediterranean world was a blend of an oral and a scribal culture. It was a world familiar with writing, but still significantly, even predominantly, oral. First-century oral cultures enjoyed literature primarily through the ears, hearing it recited by a person reading out loud.⁹ Most people could not read according to our standards of literacy. Scholars believe that the overall level of literacy in the first-century New Testament world was about twenty percent among men and a lower rate for women and individuals living in the provinces.¹⁰

⁵ Richard Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage*, New Testament Readings (New York: Routledge, 2014), 13.

⁶ Bauckham, *James*, 40.

⁷ All quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

⁸ Thomas M. Winger, “Orality as the Key to Understanding Apostolic Proclamation in the Epistles” (PhD diss., Concordia Seminary, 1997), 215.

⁹ Raymond J. Starr, “Reading Aloud: Lectors and Roman Reading,” *The Classical Journal* 86 (1991): 338.

¹⁰ Glenn S. Holland, “Paul and Performance,” in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World. A Handbook*, 2 vols., ed. J. Paul Sampley (reprinted; London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 2:242. There is some debate on the literacy level in the first-century biblical world. In his extensive study of ancient literacy, William V. Harris concludes that the overall level of literacy in the first-century ancient eastern Mediterranean world was below fifteen percent (*Ancient Literacy* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989], 267). Catherine Hezser believes that the literacy rate among Jewish individuals may have been as low as three percent, depending on how one understands and defines “literacy” (*Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*, TSAJ 81 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001], 496). Based on his study of first-century communal

James divulges its oral dimension by the customary use of aural¹¹ expressions such as “listen” (2:5; 5:4) when he intends to gain his listeners’ attention. James also employs alliteration, a rhetorical device that is best experienced when a text is spoken out loud. For example, he alliterates the initial letter π in 1:2, 11, 17, 21; 3:2; 4:1, 13–14, the initial δ in 3:8, and the initial μ in 1:11–12. Other aural devices that James utilizes extensively include assonance (e.g., 3:8, 13), asyndeton (e.g., 1:19, 27; 2:13; 3:15, 17; 4:2; 5:6), anaphora (e.g., 4:11), anadiplosis (e.g., 1:3–4, 19–20, 26–27), and homoeoteleuton (e.g., 1:6, 14; 2:12, 16, 19, 22, 23; 3:17; 4:8, 9; 5:4). Finally, rhetorical questions serve to capture the listeners’ attention and invite their participation with the oral performance of this epistle (e.g., 2:4, 14, 16; 3:11–13; 4:5, 12, 14; 5:13–14).

Ancient Letter Writing, James, and Proverb Performance

The epistle of James served as the author’s go-between—a written document, carrying communication from James in absentia to the church in the diaspora. His letter acted as a substitute for face-to-face communication (cf. Cicero, *Att.* 8.14.1; 12.53; Seneca, *Ep.* 75.1), which would presumably have taken place if James were physically present with the congregations receiving his correspondence. As is the case today, a letter in the ancient Mediterranean world was a written message employed because of the spatial separation of the correspondents.

In oral societies, written correspondence was often spoken out loud. While low literacy rates contributed to the popularity of oral recitation, even highly literate persons were accustomed to listening to passages read out loud, especially when the availability of texts was limited.¹² Reading

reading events, Brian J. Wright contends that written texts were experienced broadly by people of various social and educational levels. This might suggest that the low percentages of literacy among the Roman and Jewish population in the first century was much higher (*Communal Reading in the Time of Jesus: A Window into Early Christian Reading Practices* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017]). See also Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, *Fundamentals of New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), ch. 3.

¹¹ “Aural” means of or relating to the ear or to the sense of hearing.

¹² E.g., Pliny, *Ep.* 9.34 (Pliny the Younger, *Letters, Volume 2: Books 8–10. Panegyricus*, trans. Betty Radice, LCL 59 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969]). Seneca articulated the benefit of listening to something recited, even if a person was fully literate, when he asked and answered, “‘But why,’ one asks, should I have to continue hearing lectures on what I can read?” “‘The living voice,’ one replies, ‘is a great help.’” “‘Why should I listen to something I can read?’”

aloud the Jewish sacred books was a common practice in the synagogues of the first century (Philo, *Good Person* 81–82; Luke 4:16–21; Acts 13:15). Letters written to the churches by James and others were also read aloud to the assembly (e.g., Acts 15:22–35; Col 4:16; 1 Thess 5:27; Rev 1:3).

Given that James's letter, including the proverbial statements (e.g., 1:19, 2:26, 4:6), were read aloud before a gathering of people, it is fitting to refer to the oral reading of the maxims as proverb performances. Carole Fontaine describes a proverb performance as "the purposeful transmission of a saying in a social interaction."¹³ Katheryn Pfisterer Darr's translation of Ezek 18:2–3 illustrates Fontaine's definition. In this passage, she translates מְשָׁלִים (use a proverb) as "performing," with the understanding that the proverb was performed before an audience. Her rendition is "What do you mean by performing this proverb concerning the land of Israel, 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge?'"¹⁴ Nearly every instance of מְשָׁל (often translated as "proverb") in the Old Testament, outside of its use in the book of Proverbs, is a composition that is orally performed by characters in the narrative (e.g., 1 Sam 24:13; Ezek 12:22–23; 18:2).¹⁵ Alan Winton has investigated how Jesus's proverb performances recounted in the Synoptic

Because the living voice contributes so much" (*Ep.* 33.9; Seneca, *Epistles, Volume 1: Epistles 1–65*, trans. R. M. Gummere, LCL 75 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917], 239). As noted by Rex Winsbury, *The Roman Book: Books, Publishing and Performance in Classical Rome*, ed. David Taylor, Classical Literature and Society (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2009), 112.

¹³ Carole R. Fontaine, *Traditional Sayings in the Old Testament: A Contextual Study*, ed. D. M. Gunn, Bible and Literature Series 5 (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1982), 72.

¹⁴ Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, "Proverb Performance and Transgenerational Retribution in Ezekiel 18," in *Ezekiel's Hierarchical World Wrestling with a Tiered Reality*, ed. Stephen L. Cook and Corrine L. Patton, SBLSymS (Atlanta: SBL, 2004), 199.

¹⁵ See Fontaine for a selection of definitions based on either the style and content, function, or structure of a proverb (*Traditional Sayings*, 32–34). See Galit Hasan-Rokem for a list of criteria for determining the presence of a proverb (*Proverbs in Israeli Folk Narratives: A Structural Semantic Analysis* [Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1982], 11, 18–19, 53). Jacqueline Eliza Vayntrub argues that מְשָׁל is a speech act voiced in performance (*Beyond Orality: Biblical Poetry on Its Own Terms*, The Ancient World, ed. S. Sanders [London: Routledge, 2019]). For another survey of proverb definitions see J. J. Burden, "The Wisdom of Many: Recent Changes in Old Testament Proverb Interpretation," *OTE* 3 (1990): 341–59.

Gospels function in their literary context.¹⁶ He focuses on the oral, public, and rhetorical nature of these proverb performances. Wolfgang Mieder defines a proverb as "a concise statement of an apparent truth, which has [had or will have] currency among the people."¹⁷ Mieder's focus on the proverb as a statement (as opposed to a composition) having group acceptance is important for this study because we are concerned with a proverb recited in a communal setting—a "proverb performance."¹⁸ The formal introduction of the proverb performance in Jas 1:19 will be discussed subsequently.

James 1:19: The Introduction to the Proverb

James's proverb is introduced as: "ἴστε, ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί" ("You must understand this, my beloved" [NRSV] or "This you know, my beloved" [NASB]). Scholars differ in their view of how ἴστε should be read. Some consider it as an imperative ("You must understand this," e.g., Dibelius, McCartney¹⁹), while others understand ἴστε as an indicative form of οἶδα ("This you know," e.g., Reicke, Talbert²⁰). However, it seems best to view ἴστε as an indicative that refers to the proverbial statement that follows in Jas 1:19.²¹ As a part of the listeners' common knowledge,

¹⁶ Winton, *The Proverbs of Jesus*, 127–40. For examples of Jesus's proverb performances, see Matt 7:6; 9:10–13; 19:16–26; Mark 7:24–30; Luke 4:23.

¹⁷ Wolfgang Mieder, *Proverbs: A Handbook*, Greenwood Folklore Handbooks (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004), 4.

¹⁸ A good example of a proverb performance in a narrative context comes from the story of the unnamed wise woman of Abel Beth-Maacah (2 Sam 20:1–22). Also see Job 32:7 and 34:3 where Elihu cites proverbs in the performance arena of Job and friends. These examples were noted by Fontaine, *Smooth Words*, 160–61. For another example of a proverb performance see Isa 37:3b. For more on proverb performance, see Katheryn Pfisterer Darr's discussion of Isa 37:3 ("No Strength to Deliver: A Contextual Analysis of Hezekiah's Proverb in Isaiah 37.3b," in *New Visions of Isaiah*, ed. M. A. Sweeney and R. F. Melugin, JSOT 214 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996], 219–56).

¹⁹ Martin Dibelius, *James*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988), 108–9; Dan McCartney, *James*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 114.

²⁰ Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude*, AB 37 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 19–20; Charles H. Talbert, "James: Teaching Outlines and Selected Sermon Seeds," *RevExp* 97 (2000): 172.

²¹ Scot McKnight understands ἴστε as an indicative that relates to what precedes it in Jas 1:18 (*The Letter of James*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011], 135). In this sense verses 18–19a would be rendered: "In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. You know this."

a maxim already known in some form by the addressees,²² ἵστε introduces the proverb as such and would then be translated: “You know (ἵστε) *this* my beloved brothers, everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.”²³ This translation will be defended later in the essay.

Formulas preceding or following the recitation of a proverb tag the saying so listeners understand the statement’s source, authority, and credibility. These tags mark a statement as an appeal to the traditional wisdom, beliefs, and the cultural tenets of faith of the community at large. An example of an identification formula preceding a proverbial quote is spoken by the wise woman at Abel: “They used to say in the old days ...” (2 Sam 20:18). Pfisterer Darr notes that the pronoun “they” in this formula links the saying to the wise woman’s and Joab’s “esteemed ancestors”—a saying that certainly deserves attention.²⁴ It is likely that the introductory phrase “You know this” served as a signal to alert the listeners that they are about to hear something familiar—perhaps a tradition they have memorized that is relevant to James’s instruction.

The strongest argument against understanding Jas 1:19 as a proverb performance and instead labeling it simply as an innovative catchy maxim is if James intended the verb ἵστε as an imperative (“You must understand this, my dear brothers”) rather than an indicative (“You know this my dear brothers”). If James was not having his recipients recall a proverb they knew, then a proverb performance reading of the passage is not as strong. This is true because a proverb is performed in situations in which it is likely that the audience was familiar with the proverb, which is implied if the verb ἵστε is in the indicative mood.

Those who take the verb as an imperative do so based on one of two premises or both. The first premise is since James has a penchant for imperatives then it follows that Jas 1:19 should be viewed as an imperative. However, James’s proclivity for imperatives does not mean that he could not have chosen to change his typical style and have intended the indicative mood in Jas 1:19. A second argument often posited for translating ἵστε as an imperative is that since elsewhere in James the phrase ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί (“my dear brothers”) accompanies an imperative (e.g., Jas 1:16, 2:5), it does so in Jas 1:19 as well.²⁵ However, in Jas 3:10, the phrase

²² So Benjamin B. Hunt, “Tenor Relations in James,” in *The Epistle of James: Linguistic Exegesis of an Early Christian Letter*, ed. James D. Dvora and Z. K. Dawson, *McMaster Linguistic Exegesis of the New Testament 1* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019), 266. Hunt believes the maxim or proverb extends through verse 20.

²³ My translation.

²⁴ Pfisterer Darr, “Asking at Abel,” 108.

²⁵ E.g., Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, ZECNT 16 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 85.

is present in a declarative sentence rather than an imperatival one. Further, this argument fails to consider why James uses the phrase ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί. Simply because the vocative appears with imperatives elsewhere in James it does not necessarily follow that this was James’s motive for employing the phrase. Here Benjamin Hunt is helpful. He argues that ἀδελφοί is a familial term, which marks out James as a member of a fictive kin group (the church), expressing his co-belonging to this community.²⁶ By using the phrase in the context of an imperative or in the case of Jas 1:19, an indicative, James is able to maintain his honorable status within the group, while still asserting his role as one capable of reminding the addressees of their knowledge of this proverb and quelling any potential rebuttals to it.²⁷ The proverb will likely be more well received if James identifies himself as a member of the church family.

Further supporting that James was performing a known proverb as opposed to simply asserting a novel imperative conveying proper communication ethics is that the maxim of being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger seems to have been a universal adage. The Greeks were familiar with it (e.g., Dio Chrysostom, *Alex.* 32.2; Isocrates, *Demon.* 41) and similar proverbs can be found in both biblical and non-biblical sources.²⁸ Thus, it is likely James’s audience has heard the proverb in some form.

A final reason for understanding Jas 1:19 as being a well-known proverb that James’s audience knew and thereby supporting a proverb performance reading is that the passage contains the unanticipated conjunction δέ (but). Most all English versions omit it in translation (ἔστω δὲ πᾶς ἄνθρωπος; “Every person must be” [LEB]). The NASB retains it (“But everyone must be”). Peter Davids argues that the unexpectedness of the conjunction may indicate that the entire line is a well-known proverb of which the conjunction was once a part.²⁹

²⁶ Hunt, “Tenor Relations,” 262. Christian writers frequently used the term ἀδελφοί (brothers) for fellow members of the community (e.g., Acts 15:25; Rom 1:7; 16:5, 8, 9, 12; 1 Cor 4:14, 17; 2 Cor 12:19; Phil 2:12; 4:1; Col 1:7; Phlm 1; Heb 6:9; 1 Pet 2:11; 2 Pet 3:1; 1 John 2:7; Jude 3).

²⁷ Hunt, “Tenor Relations,” 266.

²⁸ For other proverbs similar in thought to Jas 1:19 see Prov 16:23a; 29:20; Sir 11:8; 20:7a; 22:27–23:1; 23:7–8 (on being “slow to speak”), and Prov 14:29; 15:18; 18:13; Eccl 7:9; Sir 28:8–12 (on being “slow to anger”). For a copious list of other ancient texts that combine instruction about speech, listening, and anger, see the footnotes in Allison, *Epistle of James*, 297–99.

²⁹ Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 91.

James 1:19: The Proverb

Nothing is known of a source that has the exact full proverbial statement as it appears in James: ἔστω δὲ πᾶς ἄνθρωπος ταχύς εἰς τὸ ἀκοῦσαι, βραδύς εἰς τὸ λαλῆσαι, βραδύς εἰς ὀργήν (“You know this my beloved brothers, everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger”).³⁰ However, as previously noted, similarly themed maxims are abundant. One of the closest is “Be quick to hear, and with patience give an answer” (Γίνου ταχύς ἐν ἀκροάσει σου καὶ ἐν μακροθυμίᾳ φθέγγου ἀπόκρισιν, Sir 5:11 LXX).³¹ We cannot be sure from which of the earlier wisdom sayings James has acquired the insights he expresses in the first half of the verse, but it seems he has formulated an aphorism of his own. The motive clause in the second half of the verse was most likely formulated originally as an independent aphorism. This is a fine example of the way the sage, making the wisdom of the tradition his own, expresses it in an apt proverb of his own formulation, not only transmitting but adding to the wisdom of the tradition.³²

Lack of an exact citation does not mean that James’s statement was not a traditional proverb that was widely known and respected by his recipients. André Lardinois argues that certain Greek proverbs were, at least until the fourth century BCE, part of a living and dynamic tradition.³³ In every performance of a proverb there was a re-creation of the saying—very much like what occurred in the oral transmission of epic verse. Proverbs were re-created with the help of traditional formulae and themes. To support his view, Lardinois cites several proverbs that are not identical but communicate a similar theme.³⁴ For example, Plutarch’s *Lycurgus* (19.12) demonstrates one form of a proverb: “A city will be well fortified which is surrounded by brave men and not by bricks.”³⁵ A comparable idea

³⁰ My translation.

³¹ The Greek translation comes from *Septuaginta: With Morphology* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979). The English translation is from Rick Brannan et al., eds., *The Lexham English Septuagint* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2012). For other proverbs similar in thought to Jas 1:19 see footnote 28.

³² Bauckham, *James*, 83–84.

³³ André Lardinois, “The Wisdom and Wit of Many: The Orality of the Greek Proverbial Expressions,” in *Speaking Volumes: Orality and Literacy in the Greek and Roman World*, ed. Janet Watson, Mnemosyne: Supplementum 218 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 94.

³⁴ Lardinois, “The Wisdom and Wit of Many,” 94.

³⁵ “Οὐκ ἂν εἴη ἀτειχιστος πόλις ἄτις ἀνδρῆσσι, καὶ οὐ πλίνθοις ἐστεφάνωται” (Plutarch, *Lives, Volume I: Theseus and Romulus, Lycurgus and Numa, Solon and Publicola*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, LCL 46 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914], 266–67).

surfaces in a proverb by Alcaeus. It says, “... for warlike men are a city’s tower” (*Fragments* 112.10).³⁶ Often in comparing similar proverbs, one of the main terms is either left out altogether or replaced by a synonym or a circumlocution. Sometimes the proverb was expanded. For example, in the proverb cited above, ships were added to the equation. Therefore, Sophocles said that “a wall or a ship is nothing without men who live inside it.”³⁷ In another version, Thucydides stated, “... for it is men that make a State, not walls nor ships devoid of men” (*History of the Peloponnesian War* 7.77.7).³⁸ Lardinois notes that in many ancient oral societies the mere repetition of words was frowned upon.³⁹ So “traditionality” hardly ever meant an exact repetition of words from the past.

An adapted proverb is present in 4 Macc 18:16. It cites the first line of a slightly altered proverb from Prov 3:18: “He recounted to you Solomon’s proverb, ‘There is a tree of life for those who do his will.’” Novel renditions or alterations of traditional proverbs occur in several New Testament books. For example, Jas 4:6 quotes Prov 3:34 from the Septuagint but has θεός (God) instead of the LXX’s κύριος (Lord).⁴⁰ The Masoretic Text lacks either designation. Romans 12:20 cites Prov 25:21–22 LXX but uses ψώμιζε—a different verb than the Septuagint’s τρέφε, to describe the act of feeding. Finally, 2 Pet 2:22 cites only a portion of Prov 26:11.

It is important to understand that in societies like ancient Greece or the first-century Mediterranean world, where most verbal art was still produced orally, a saying could be both traditional and repurposed at the same time. Thus, it is probable that no source can be found for the exact wording of Jas 1:19 because it is a repurposed adage by the author, having been slightly adapted from some portions of well-known proverbs.⁴¹ The adapted adage preserved some main kernel of ancient wisdom, allowing it to still be recognized by the listeners as traditional material.

³⁶ Alcaeus Sappho, *Greek Lyric, Volume I: Sappho and Alcaeus*, ed. and trans. David A. Campbell, LCL 142 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 285.

³⁷ Sophocles, *Ajax, Electra, Oedipus Tyrannus*, ed. and trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, LCL 20 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 331.

³⁸ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War, Volume 4: Books 7–8*, trans. C. F. Smith, LCL 169 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), 159.

³⁹ Lardinois, “The Wisdom and Wit of Many,” 105.

⁴⁰ 1 Peter 5:5 cites Prov 3:34 LXX and uses θεός rather than κύριος. Romans 12:17 cites Prov 3:4 LXX with some alterations.

⁴¹ So Allison, *Epistle of James*, 299.

James 1:19: The Proverb's Context

Some scholars assign the context for the proverb in Jas 1:19 to the discussion in verses 17–18.⁴² Others claim it belongs to the topic following in verses 20–27.⁴³ A few commentators assert a broader context for the proverb and claim that the maxim represents general advice applicable to all sorts of situations.⁴⁴ This last group of scholars contend that the verse intentionally allows for a wide application. So, the proverb was meant to admonish James's recipients to hear God and put into practice his commands and to also encourage the church to embrace proper speech ethics when in dialogue with fellow congregants.

Rather than claim that James intended broad application for the proverb as suggested above, it is important to note that paroemiologists have demonstrated that much of the intent of a proverb's utterance is dependent on the social context in which it is used.⁴⁵ Raymond Firth states, "The meaning of a proverb is made clear only when side by side with the translation is given a full account of the accompanying social situation, the reason for its use, its effect, and its significance in speech."⁴⁶ I would add that in the case of James, a written composition, the literary context must also be considered to determine the proverb's meaning.⁴⁷

The immediate literary context for the proverb in Jas 1:19, both before and after, involves a focus on the divine word and the need for undivided attention to it. In the material preceding the proverb, James asserts that

⁴² E.g., Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 37A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 199.

⁴³ E.g., Dibelius, *James*, 108–9.

⁴⁴ E.g., Allison, *Epistle of James*, 301–2. Also see William R. Baker, *Personal Speech-ethics in the Epistle of James*, WUNT 2/68 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 87.

⁴⁵ The folklorist research of proverbs is called paroemiology.

⁴⁶ Raymond Firth, "Proverbs in Native Life, with Special Reference to those of the Maori," *Folklore* 37 (1926): 134.

⁴⁷ A proverb's use in two different social contexts is found in the books of Ezekiel and Jeremiah. In Ezekiel, the prophet says, "What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge?'" (Ezek 18:2). Here the prophet is instructing the people that every individual is accountable before God. No one can blame the former generation for their own difficulties. The same proverb is employed in Jeremiah, where it has been applied differently. In Jeremiah, it is more consoling, declaring that any who open themselves to God's goodness will eventually be restored by him: "In those days they shall no longer say: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'" (Jer 31:29). This example was noted by Susan E. Gillingham, *The Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford Bible Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 96.

while God is not the source of temptation (1:13), he is the source of good (1:16–18). James's prime example of God's goodness is Christian conversion, described as first fruits, which is brought about by hearing and embracing the gospel, "the word of truth" (1:18).⁴⁸ The first requirement of those who have been given birth by the word of truth is to receive the implanted word⁴⁹ that has the power to save their souls (1:21) and allow it to become the norm for their existence. In this context, James's proverb is describing the proper stance for reception of the implanted and truthful divine word. That stance requires a swift, perhaps enthusiastic hearing—a hearing of both God and the teachers through whom the word is proclaimed. The proper stance also involves a slowness to speak and slowness to anger. In other words, obedience to the perfect law, the law of liberty, which is highlighted in verses 1:22–25. Only this stance to the divine word will achieve the righteousness that God desires (1:20).

Present also in the larger context of James is a focus on the divine word as a source of authority, to which James's listeners are to submit. The divine word is referred to as the "royal law" (2:8)⁵⁰ and Scripture (2:8, 23; 4:5). At other places in James, God's word is simply called the law (2:9, 10, 11), or wisdom that comes from above (3:17). Ultimately James's proverb, asserting swift hearing, slowness to speak, and controlled anger, means submission to God (4:7) and his teaching through divinely appointed instructors, including James (3:1).

James 1:19: Performance Analysis

Performing a proverb in a social setting had several functions and could serve various purposes. It was often employed to: (1) maintain or restore peace in a communal setting, (2) separate the author from the source of the instruction by first, invoking traditional wisdom and second, by utilizing a poetic sound arrangement. The poetic sound arrangement imparts the proverb with a persuasive force, giving the impression of having perhaps even a divine origin. I will discuss these features and functions subsequently.

An initial reason for citing a proverb was to maintain or restore harmony in a tense or potentially tense social setting. A proverb was considered wise if it was felt to promote a harmonious society, with appropriate

⁴⁸ See Johnson for a discussion of the understanding of the phrase "word of truth" (*The Letter of James*, 197–98).

⁴⁹ For a discussion on the potential meanings of "implanted word" (ἔμφυτον λόγον), see Allison, *Epistle of James*, 289–90.

⁵⁰ For a discussion on the notion of royal law, see Allison, *Epistle of James*, 402–5.

and agreeable relations on all levels, ranging from the immediate family (husband-wife, father-son, mother-daughter, sibling-sibling), to the residential unit (master-slave, mistress-maid), to the village, city, church, to the whole kingdom (king-subjects), and to God's realm (God-humans).⁵¹ Every proverb that promotes harmony at any level was considered true. Thus, proverbs were fashioned to direct positive attitudes and behavior that promoted harmony at all social levels of a community. Sayings were also formulated that would discourage attitudes and behavior that would be obtrusive to an orderly and harmonious world. As proverbs were created and employed, they became part of a community's powerful and respected traditions of time-tested wisdom.

The literary context where the proverb is situated in Jas 1:19, both the immediate and the larger context of the entire epistle, involves divine instruction. Therefore, the proverb was likely aimed to preserve and/or restore peace between God and the letter's recipients who were being exhorted to submit to him. If the recipients recognize the proverb as "true," agreeing it "fits" their situation, then it follows that they ought to act in accordance with the weight of the traditional proverbial wisdom.

The traditional nature of proverbs is an important factor, which helps to facilitate another function of a proverb performance—it allows speakers who use them to express opinions without strictly being accountable for them. In quoting an ancient proverb, the speaker fades into the background by calling the community's proverbial wisdom to mind. People can have an immense veneration for the past and for the wisdom that has been handed on to them by past generations. Because of a proverb's antiquity and accuracy of insight, it becomes sanctioned or almost "sanctified" by the culture as wisdom of the elders that must be taken seriously and must be given "weight" when spoken.⁵²

⁵¹ The discussion of the community hierarchy relies on Michael V. Fox, "The Epistemology of the Book of Proverbs," *JBL* 126 (2007): 678.

⁵² Joseph Russo, "The Poetics of the Ancient Greek Proverb," *Journal of Folklore Research* 20 (1983): 121. It is noteworthy that in 1 Kgs 20:11 and Judg 8:21 a proverb performance takes place between two different population groups, suggesting that proverbial sayings had some acceptance even between hostile foreign groups. Fontaine says, "The sages were comparative thinkers: because of their association 'vertically' through time with 'tradition' and 'horizontally' (across cultures during the same time period) with wisdom contacts in other cultures, they did not perform their intellectual activities in a theological, ethical, literary or practical vacuum. In the midst of Israel's culture which emphasized its theological 'uniqueness,' the sages worked with the connections and similarities of their

James frequently cautions his listeners about the dangers of speech.⁵³ Because he is engaged in the very speaking acts that he warns his audience about, James must make his speech avoid the perils he cautions against.⁵⁴ To avoid self-contradiction, James manages to be consistent with his own notions of the proper use of speech, in part, by citing traditional proverbs.

While James steps aside by asserting proverbial authority, he simultaneously attains the superior position of being the leader who can impose appropriate standards on the church community. By invoking a wise tradition on listening, speaking, and anger, James not only disappears as an individual, but he also imposes the weight of traditional wisdom on his church. The need to depersonalize speech when James is the one speaking for God is important. James's proverb concerning speaking and listening (to him and ultimately God) allows him to say what is necessary without creating additional social tensions. James is able to convey an opinion (perhaps a dissident one), "all the while from within a 'safety net' of shared assumptions."⁵⁵ Further, the citation will more likely ensure that his (God's) teaching gains acceptance by his audience.⁵⁶

In addition to the content of an ancient traditional proverb, possessing authoritative weight within a group, proverbs also sound authoritative by the way the words and letters of the saying are arranged. Their poetic acoustical features and formal qualities give the impression of an idea and authority that originates from a source other than the speaker. An analysis of the proverb in Jas 1:19 reveals several sound features bolstering its authority. The proverb is set in parallel below with certain sound elements tagged. A parallelism results from the repetition of similar grammatical

teachings to those of their neighbors, creating a kind of intellectual ecumenism, as it were" ("The Social Roles of Women in the World of Wisdom," in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature*, ed. Athalya Brenner, The Feminist Companion to the Bible 9 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995], 26–27).

⁵³ James believes that it is more difficult to avoid errors in speech than in any other aspect of daily life for he says, "anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect" (Jas 3:2). Mistakes in speech are significant. Like ships guided by a small rudder "the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits" (3:4–5). James states that though "every species of beast and bird can be tamed ... no one can tame the tongue, a restless evil full of deadly poison" (3:7–9).

⁵⁴ Carol Poster, "Words as Works: Philosophical Protreptic and the Epistle of James," in *Rhetorics for a New Millennium*, ed. J. D. Hester, Studies in Antiquity and Christianity 14 (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 250.

⁵⁵ Fontaine, *Smooth Words*, 164–65.

⁵⁶ Arland D. Jacobson, "Proverbs and Social Control: A New Paradigm for Wisdom Studies," in *Gnosticism and the Early Christian World: In Honor of James M. Robinson*, ed. J. E. Goehring (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1990), 81.

constructions and phrases.

ἔστω δὲ πᾶς ἄνθρωπος
ταχύς εἰς τὸ ἀκοῦσαι,
βραδύς εἰς τὸ λαλήσαι,
βραδύς εἰς ὀργήν.

Several features give the proverb a musical ring: the initial nominative adjectives in the first two phrases of the proverb all ending in υς, the duplication of the εἰς τό plus the active infinitives each ending in –σαι, and the presence of the same number of syllables in each line.⁵⁷

The second and third line of the proverb is an example of anaphora (Rhet. Her. 4.13.19; Quintilian, *Inst.* 9.3.30), where the same words (βραδύς εἰς) begin successive phrases. Anaphora contributes to the rhythm and rhyme in the proverb. Rhythm transpires when there is the periodic re-emergence of the same significant element or factor. Pseudo-Longinus, in discussing the sublime or that which produces exalted language and has the effect of being dignified and filled with grandeur, points to the aural effects of rhythm ([*Subl.*] 39–42).

The final line relates to the previous two by having the initial nominative adjective followed by εἰς. However, the third line lacks an article, and it finishes with a noun rather than an infinitive. Given it is the final phrase, William Baker contends that those differences serve to highlight a progression.⁵⁸ A calm temperament is more likely to be achieved when one puts the previous two lines into practice. This dynamic, present in many proverbs, is known as the “act-consequence” relationship, where certain good behavior produces good consequences.⁵⁹ There is a general sense of the harmony between action and result that a person may trust.

Like an incantation, there is something hypnotic and ritualistic about hearing a proverb. Its aesthetics might mesmerize listeners through its rhythms, making a listener more receptive to the content. Expressions of rhyme, alliteration, parallelism, and brevity among other poetic devices contribute to the idea that if it sounds right it must be true. Vessela Valiavitcharska remarks that rhythm has significant power.⁶⁰ If surrendered to, rhythm commands the human psyche and carries away judgment,

⁵⁷ Baker, *Personal Speech-ethics*, 86.

⁵⁸ Baker, *Personal Speech-ethics*, 86.

⁵⁹ Carole R. Fontaine, “Wisdom Traditions in the Hebrew Bible,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33 (2000): 103.

⁶⁰ Vessela Valiavitcharska, *Rhetoric and Rhythm in Byzantium: The Sound of Persuasion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1.

making it the ultimate rhetorical tool.⁶¹ Thus, the content of a proverb, recited in a performance arena, does not need to be validated because the poetic (magical) elements of the proverb have already accomplished this task.

These acoustic elements are often intended as mnemonic devices, which help the speaker to remember the exact wording of the proverb. However, since it appears that James has re-created a proverb from traditional material, not repeating any particular proverb verbatim, it is more likely that the poetics served to make the text stand out from the text before and after the maxim. Expressions displaying such poetic acoustic elements are, in some sense, the language of God. Their disparity from ordinary speech, the otherness of a poetic proverb, makes it appear as “revealed” truth.⁶² According to one ancient Jewish tradition, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet as well as the art of writing were created on the sixth day (eve of the Sabbath; m. Avot 5, 6). The idea that writing was given to humanity as part of the very creation of the world was known also other ancient cultures.⁶³ James Kugel observes that some of the Psalms, which are poetic by nature, contain oracles where God is addressing himself to Israel, or to the nations or to pagan deities (e.g., Pss 81:6–16, 82:2–7).⁶⁴ As Robert Alter has said, poetry is our best human model of complex and rich communication, being “solemn, weighty, and forceful.”⁶⁵ So, poetry is a fitting language style to represent divine speech. Thus, in addition to James’s traditional proverb invoking ancestral authority, the maxim might have been perceived as if it was issuing from God himself.

Summary and Conclusion

James 1:19 can be classified as a proverb performance. With the help

⁶¹ Valiavitcharska, *Rhetoric and Rhythm*, 1.

⁶² Richard J. Clifford, “Your Attention Please! Heeding the Proverbs,” *JSOT* 29 (2004): 157.

⁶³ E.g., The Egyptian god of writing was Thoth, who was said to have revealed the scribal arts to humanity (William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 26).

⁶⁴ James L. Kugel, “Poets and Prophets: An Overview,” in *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*, ed. James L. Kugel (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 6.

⁶⁵ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 147.

of traditional formulae and themes, James has re-created a proverb, conveying ancient wisdom that was recognized as truthful by his audience. A proverb performance analysis of Jas 1:19 has helped us to appreciate the value of the methodology, highlighting the indirect authority of the proverb and the importance of contextual factors in its interpretation. By invoking the traditional authority, James uses indirection to assert perhaps a dissident opinion about hearing divine instruction: “be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.” Further, the rhythm in James’s proverb, created by the poetic oral features, gives his language additional certification of the truth of its content, perhaps even establishing a divine stamp of approval on the saying. James, as the teacher of the divine word, can call for his recipients to listen to and obey him and in doing so hear God speaking, thereby preserving, or restoring them to a proper divine-human relationship.

Additionally, this essay has demonstrated that there is not only value in *what* James says but in *how* he says it. While James’s use of rhetorical expressions has been well noted by scholars (e.g., alliteration, assonance, asyndeton, anaphora, anadiplosis, homoeoteleuton), proposing Jas 1:19 as an example of proverb performance advances the discussion for the study of James.