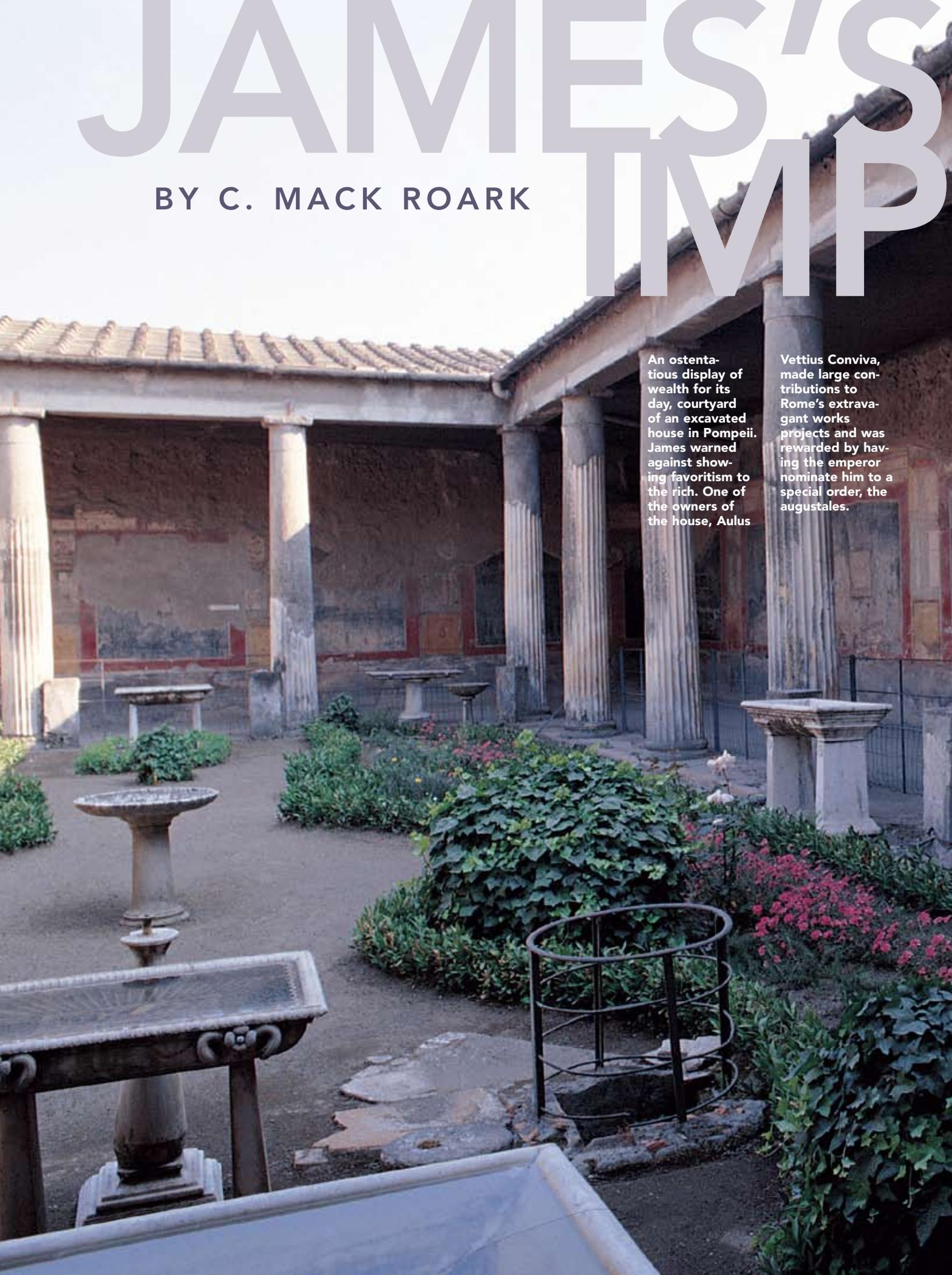


JAMES'S TMP

BY C. MACK ROARK



An ostentatious display of wealth for its day, courtyard of an excavated house in Pompeii. James warned against showing favoritism to the rich. One of the owners of the house, Aulus

Vettius Conviva, made large contributions to Rome's extravagant works and was rewarded by having the emperor nominate him to a special order, the *augustales*.

ETHICAL ERATIVES

CLEARLY, the Book of James is the most thoroughly practical and most ethically intensive of all the New Testament writings. Unlike Paul, who sometimes began a letter with theology and ended it with ethics (Rom. 1-11/12-15; Eph. 1-3/4-6; Col. 1-2/3-4), James's letter is a series of ethical admonitions with the theological underpinnings usually implicit, not explicit. James's epistle is notoriously difficult to outline because these admonitions often are apparently unconnected and may recur randomly throughout the letter.

The 108 verses of the Book of James contain 55 imperative verbs. This is the highest concentration of imperatives in any comparable text in the New Testament. The second highest concentration is in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which has 50 imperative verbs in 107 verses.¹ Given the kinship of Jesus and James this similarity should not be surprising, nor should one be surprised that the ethical themes of Jesus' Sermon are reflected in James's letter. Just as imperative verbs dominate the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, so in James they carry the thrust of the letter. Of the 24 paragraphs in the Greek text of James all but 4 or 5 begin with an imperative. Although some of this is lost in translation, of 36 paragraphs in James in the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB), about half begin with an imperative sentence. So James, assuming a sound theology, pressed for a life consistent with that theology.

James, whose Greek is among the best in the New Testament, was precise and intentional in his use of the language. Imperative verbs in Greek can be in either present tense or aorist tense, and the difference can be significant. One scholar counted 31 present tense imperatives and 28 aorist imperatives in James.² In the imperative mood the tense of a verb does not indicate time of action, but kind of action. Present tense usually refers to an ongoing or repeated action: "make it a habit to..." or "keep on...", while aorist imperatives usually state more simply "do this." This distinction is not always noteworthy, and English translations rarely



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Above: A Neo-Assyrian Era plaque detailing (in row three) the exorcism of a demon from a sick man. At the top, Pazuzu overlooks the scene. The top row includes emblems of Akkadian and

Babylonian gods. In row two are seven demons with the heads of animals. In row three, the sick man, lying on the bed, raises his hand for prayer. Two priests are dressed in fishlike garments. In row four

is Lamashtu, the spouse of Pazuzu, kneeling on a donkey, both in a boat. The boat will be filled with the evils of hell. James warned against a hollow faith; that even the demons believe there is a God (2:19).

reflect the nuance. Sometimes (but not always) the aorist imperative will yield a greater sense of urgency, as perhaps with "weep" in James 5:1. The sense of the present (ongoing, continuing) tense is

LESSON REFERENCE

ETB: Book of James

in 5:12: “do not swear.” The Greek imperatives can be rendered in English with “should” or “must” as is often the case with James in the HCSB.

If ethical imperatives drive the Letter of James, what were those ethical concerns? James wove several prominent themes throughout his letter, including: wealth and poverty, care of the needy, temptations and trials, works of faith, and speech. Each of these appears early in the letter, then reappears again and again throughout.

The wealthy’s abuse of the poor, coupled with the call to care for the needy, was a major concern for James. Three times he juxtaposed the needy against the wealthy to illustrate a point. In 1:9-11, he presented both poverty and wealth as examples of the “various trials” (v. 2)³ one might endure. Then in 2:1-7, James addressed un-Christlike partiality in the way the church was responding to the poor. And in 2:15-17, James presented the futility of faith without works as being like the emptiness of words without action when a brother or sister was in need of food or clothing. The imperative is clear: faith in Christ and favoritism are incompatible.

James highlighted his concern with the abuses of wealth again in 4:13-17 and 5:1-6. Both passages begin with a strong command: “Come now!” Not found elsewhere in the New Testament, this has the rhetorical impact of “Now pay attention!” In 4:13-17, James made clear the futility of building a life around money. In 5:1-6, he called to judgment those who gain wealth by abusing others.

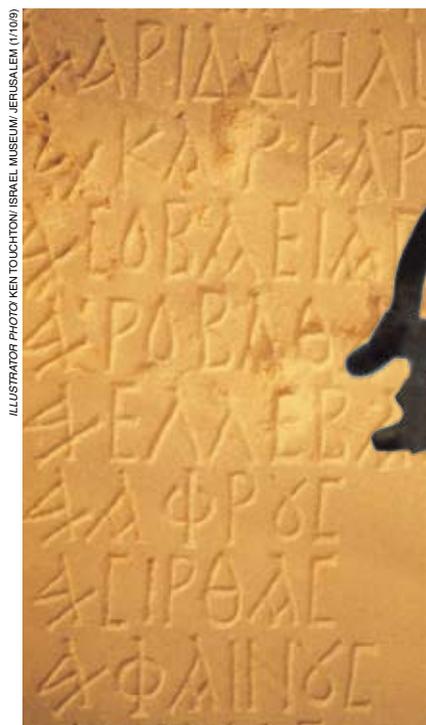
Each of these texts reflects James’s contention that religion in its purest form expresses itself in the way one treats the marginalized or the poor and needy. “Pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father is this: to look after orphans

and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (1:27). The Old Testament points out the widow and the orphan, along with the stranger in the gate and the alien in the land, as examples of vulnerability. Because these persons could be so easily abused, God’s people always were called to be their champion.

Another major ethical theme in James is the abuse of the tongue. Religion that does not tame the tongue, James wrote, “is useless” (1:26). James repeated this theme at least once in every chapter (2:12; 3:1-12; 4:11; 5:9,12). The strongest exhortation about the way Christians speak is in chapter 3, where James devoted nearly as much attention to

Right: Imperial tax decrees etched on marble plaques for the Roman emperor Justinian; found at Beersheba in Israel. Tax collectors often became wealthy at the expense of others.

Below: Place used for tax collection up to the 4th–5th centuries A.D.; at ancient Mactaris in North Africa. Many of those to whom James addressed his letter, “the 12 tribes in the Dispersion” (1:1, HCSB), resettled throughout the Roman Empire, including the regions of North Africa.



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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO (35/90/60)



controlling the tongue as he did to faith and works (2:14-26). Drawing on a variety of images (horse and bit, ship and rudder, spark in a forest, animals tamed and untamed, springs of fresh and bitter water), James showed the potency and the potential for good or ill in our speech, and so warned against a believer rushing into teaching. Other ethical themes and imperatives in James's letter are related to temptation and sin (1:13-15; 4:1-6), patience in trials (1:2-4; 5:7-11), and the requirement of prayer (1:5-8; 4:1-3; 5:13-18).

Underlying all of James's ethical concerns was the necessity for consistency in the Christian life. His call was to action. James knew that profession without practice was meaningless. Believers are not only to "Amen" the sermon, they must live it out: "be doers of the

Right: From Caesarea Philippi; reverse depicts Tyche standing, facing right, holding a cornucopia and a rudder. Her feet rest on prows of a ship.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ JAMES MCLEMORE (30/24/16)

word" (1:22-25). With a touch of humor he illustrated this point by parodying a man who looked in a mirror and noticed he needs to fix himself up, but then did nothing.

In 2:14-26, we find James's strongest case for a faith that expressed itself in works. Using as examples Abraham the patriarch and Rahab the prostitute, James showed that faith that did not make a difference was not genuine faith. Even the demons have that kind of faith (2:19). Five times in this paragraph, James repeated his point, with only slight variation (vv. 14,17,20,24,26). Reading these verses one after the other emphasizes James's point.

The same call to a life that is consistent with faith recurs in 3:13-18. Here James commanded the Christian to live by the wisdom that comes "from above" (v. 15). In 4:7-10, James used 10 aorist verbs in urgent, rapid-fire rhetoric; each demanding action: submit, resist, draw near, cleanse, purify, be miserable, mourn, weep, change laughter to mourning, and humble yourselves.

No book in the New Testament is so packed with imperatives as is the little Letter of James. Small wonder some thought James taught salvation by works. Couple the preponderance of ethical and moral commands with James's argument (2:14-26) that "faith without works is dead" (v. 26) and one might think James is at loggerheads with Paul, who said "we know that no one is justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16). In fact, James and Paul were looking at the Christian life from two different perspectives; one retrospective, the other prospective. While Paul denounced any reliance on the law to gain salvation, James denounced any relaxation of the law by those who already gained salvation. Paul's primary concern was theology, while James's was morality and ethics. **B**

1. These numbers are by my count, and are only for verbs imperative in form. Adding aorist subjunctive prohibitions, imperatival futures, and imperatival infinitives brings the numbers to 58 imperatives in James and 70 imperatives in the Sermon on the Mount. See also J. B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James* (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1977), p. ccxxx., who found 59 imperatives in James, and Peter Davids, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 58, who found 49.

2. Mayor, p. ccxxx.

3. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/12/77)



Left: Horse-bit with cheek-pieces in the form of horses; from the Early Iron Age (1200-1000 B.C.).

Lower left: Diorite stone cube statue of Haroua. Partial translation: "The big steward of the divine worshiper of Amen Amenirdis said, 'I say this to you, to you who want a future in these millions of years: my mistress elevated me in my little infancy, she pushed me in my adolescence; the king entrusted me with tasks in my youth... and I accomplished them better.... I gave to those who have nothing, I enriched the orphan in the city, I made what was loved by man and what pleased the gods.... I gave bread to those who were hungry, the clothes to those who were naked, I hunted the suffering and turned away their adversity.'"



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