

“The Prayer of Faith Will Save the Sick”: Revisiting a Complex Passage in Light of Biblical Context—James 5:13–18

Brian Hand¹

Biblical theology offers such spiritual reward that it deserves to be treated as more than merely one viable approach among many. The reader who understands the theological themes within a book, the progressive revelatory development throughout the books, and the mutually informing relationships among the books has a much greater prospect of grasping what Scripture is saying in its particular contexts. Biblical theology helps the reader recognize theological boundaries (inhibiting heterodoxy) so that it becomes harder to take a biblical author out of his scriptural context. It also supplies theological background to guide us through thorny passages in which we find “some things . . . that are hard to understand” (2 Pt 3:16).² Applying the method of biblical theology to James 5:13–18 provides insight into James’s likely meaning.

Protestant theologians have long recognized the intractability of James 5:13–18.³ Daniel Hayden observes, “The evident promise inherent in the phrase ‘the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick’ (5:15) is an ever-lurking embarrassment for many who have known failure in trying to apply this passage to the physically ill.”⁴ Keith Warrington says, “James clearly expects the prayer of faith to succeed. In the absence of such success, many contemporary suggestions have been offered.”⁵ And R. Kent Hughes concludes, “*Prima facie* James’ directions did not ‘work’ for Ponnammal [a woman with cancer who grew worse and died after following the procedure outlined

¹ Brian Hand serves as professor of New Testament at BJU Seminary and a deacon of Cornerstone Baptist Church of Greenville, South Carolina. He is the author of *The Worthy Champion: A Christology of the Book of Revelation Based on Elements of Its Literary Composition* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2008), *Upright Downtime: Making Wise Choices about Entertainment* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2008), and *The Climax of Biblical Prophecy: A Guide to Interpreting Biblical Prophecy* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2012).

² Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

³ Andrew M. Bowden summarizes seven different interpretations of James 5. From his list, the view that most closely aligns with that of this paper is #4 (spiritual sickness/spiritual healing). One of Bowden’s most helpful contributions is his documenting the commentators who hold the various positions (e.g., Kaiser, Moo, Ropes, Windisch, Davids, Martin, Shogren, Popkes, and McKnight hold a physical sickness/physical healing view). “An Overview of the Interpretive Approaches to James 5.13–18,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 13/1 (2014): 67–81.

⁴ Daniel R. Hayden, “Calling the Elders to Pray,” *BibSac* 138/551 (1981): 263.

⁵ Keith Warrington, “James 5:14–18: Healing Then and Now,” *International Review of Mission* 93, nos. 370–71 (2004): 357. Warrington’s article provides helpful arguments from biblical and extra-biblical lexical uses of the terms involved.

by James]. . . . Honesty demands that we admit that such is often the case when Christians attempt to follow this Scripture.”⁶

Having agreed on the complexity of this passage, theologians diverge in their interpretation of it. Roman Catholicism teaches *The Anointing of the Sick*—known prior to the 1970s as Extreme Unction.⁷ This doctrine describes a process in which (1) those who are at the point of death can call for (2) a priest who has been appointed by a bishop (3) to pray for them as a representative of the only true church of Christ on earth and (4) to anoint them sacramentally in a fashion that (5) actually saves them spiritually from serious sins that would serve as serious impediments to eternal life and that had not been previously confessed to a priest. The following portion of the text that treats Elijah is largely irrelevant to the interpretation of the anointing of the sick.

Protestant theologians reject these points of Catholic interpretation, but they also differ from one another. Their interpretations form three major views (with several permutations of each): (1) that James 5:13–18 pertained to sickness only in the apostolic age and is inapplicable in the present; (2) that James addresses physical sickness in every age; or (3) that James addresses spiritual weakness. All of the Protestant interpretations have the advantage that they introduce fewer extra-textual concepts than the Catholic interpretation does, and the Protestant commentators handle the connection of James 5:13–16 with vv. 17–18 more effectively.⁸ For instance, James does not limit ἀσθενεῖ (sickness, v. 14) to a sickness to the point of death; he does not refer to ἱερεῖς (priests) but πρεσβυτέρους (elders); he does not specify a limited class of leaders who had been appointed by a particular high-ranking church authority; he does not ask the elders to pray as representatives of the only true church; and he does not state or imply that the *saving* in view is eschatological. Thus all of the Protestant interpretations handle the text more accurately than the Roman Catholic view.

Of the three Protestant interpretations, the belief that James addresses the healing of physical sickness in every era has greatest numerical support among the commentators.⁹ Both supporters and critics of this position point out that the sick person often grows worse or even dies in spite of having practiced what James says will save the sick. This disappointment leads to the introduction of a caveat concerning healing, namely, that James 5:13–18 applies only if the Lord wills.

While such a caveat demonstrates theological sensitivity to the overarching sovereignty of God, it also introduces two difficulties. First, a qualified approach to James’s use of ἀσθενεῖ appears to contradict similar instances of ἀσθενέω/ἀσθένεια in the Gospel accounts. Jesus and his disciples could heal all manner of sickness (Matt. 10:1) and even raise people from the dead (Matt. 10:8). In only one instance was an attempted exorcism unsuccessful (Matt. 17:14–21), and its ineffectiveness was due

⁶ R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith that Works*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 254.

⁷ Roger L. Omanson notes that even the Catholic Church did not view the passage as preparatory for death until the ninth century. “The Certainty of Judgment and the Power of Prayer: James 5,” *Review & Expositor* 83/ 3 (1986): 433.

⁸ John Christopher Thomas, for example, rejects the Roman Catholic doctrine and observes, “The purpose for the anointing he describes is to bring healing and preserve life, not to prepare for death.” “The Devil, Disease, and Deliverance: James 5.14–16,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 2 (1993): 36.

⁹ See Hughes, 255–60; Dan G. McCartney, *James*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 252–57; and Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James*, NICNT, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 434–44.

not to variance with God’s will but to unbelief on the part of the disciples. Interpreting James 5:14 as physical healing introduces variance in the successfulness of healing in the NT—a variance that puts situational distance between the historical events of the Gospels and the ongoing events of James. Yet this new paradigm undermines the argument that James is using ἀσθενέω in a manner conditioned by the Gospel accounts. At very least, James is not addressing an ongoing capacity to heal that matches the disciples’ authority while Christ was on earth, yet James writes during the earliest stage of apostolic labor—a time in which miraculous sign gifts were still operational.

Second, replacing “the prayer of faith” with “the prayer that believes that the Lord will do what He wills” does not obviate the difficulty that the passage locates effectiveness in “the prayer of faith.” The main verb still indicates success in healing. See Table 1 below for a visual depiction of this attempted resolution to the problem

Table 1—The logical problem with substituting for “the prayer of faith”

the prayer of faith	will save the sick
the belief that God will do what he wills	will save the sick

Essentially this solution produces the statement “the belief that God will do whatever he wants to do will in fact save the sick.” The resultant statement asserts that the sick are saved on the basis that the one praying *believes* that God will do what he wants to do.

The dissonance between the Gospel accounts of healing and James’s accounts coupled with the seemingly intractable problem concerning the phrase, “the prayer of faith will save,” does not rule out the majority Protestant interpretation.¹⁰ It simply shows how hard it is for a single interpretation to explain all of the available data. This article will examine key concepts in both context and intertextuality that have a direct bearing on the interpretation of this passage.

The Context

One of the first complexities in the passage occurs in verse 14. James commands that the one who is ἀσθενεῖ (weak/sick) must call for the elders of the church to engage in a series of activities relevant to his weakness. Several contextual features may favor the perspective that ἀσθενεῖ addresses spiritual weakness or discouragement in regard to the faith.

¹⁰ Although the physical sickness/physical healing view has become the majority position, Bowden claims that “the earliest interpreters held to [the spiritual weakness] position, and the early church is silent about any sort of ritual for healing the sick as described in James” (73). The early church lay close to the era in which the apostolic gifts of healing were operative. It is demonstrable that both the Apostolic church father Clement and the Ante-Nicene commentators Origen and Chrysostom held that James 5 addresses spiritual sickness, not physical.

The Meaning of ἀσθένεια/ἀσθενέω

Conservative commentators generally agree that James was very likely the first written New Testament book.¹¹ It has strong connections with the Old Testament in both style and content,¹² and it clearly falls into the dual genres of wisdom literature and paraenetic epistolary writing.¹³ These facts have direct bearing on James’s usage of ἀσθενέω. James also personally witnessed some of the miracles of Jesus, and so any analysis of the vocabulary of James ought to consider the NT historical context as well.

James 5:14 uses the verb ἀσθενέω, which is related to the cognate noun ἀσθένεια. The noun occurs 29x in the combined LXX and GNT (5x LXX; 24x GNT). Three key observations stand out. First, as Table 2 below illustrates, *none* of the OT uses of ἀσθένεια indicate sickness.¹⁴

Table 2—Representative uses of the noun ἀσθένεια

Psalm 16:4 The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips.	spiritual/emotional weakness
Ecclesiastes 12:4 And the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low , and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low.	generic weakness
Jeremiah 6:21 Therefore thus says the LORD: “Behold, I will lay before this people stumbling blocks against which they shall stumble; fathers and sons together, neighbor and friend shall perish.”	generic weakness

¹¹ For one such example, see Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 712.

¹² Henry Clarence Thiessen claims that “there is no more Jewish book in the New Testament than the Epistle of James.” *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), 271. Doremus Almy Hayes concurs, “The Ep. of Jas is the most Jewish writing in the NT. . . . If we eliminate two or three passages containing references to Christ, the whole epistle might find its place just as properly in the Canon of the OT as in that of the NT, as far as its substance of doctrine and contents is concerned.” “James, Epistle Of,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 3:1562. The Jewishness of James is so strong that Joseph B Mayor felt it necessary to combat Spitta’s claim that the book of James was a Jewish book from the first century B.C. that the Christians simply took over. *The Epistle of James* (London: Macmillan, 1913; Reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990), cxcii.

¹³ Hayes, 1562; see Mayor’s list of analogs to the OT in which the wisdom books (Job, Proverbs) are heavily represented in James (cxi–cxiii). While Moo does not point specifically to wisdom literature, he observes that James utilizes images and metaphors from the natural world, a phenomenon characteristic of wisdom literature. Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. Leon Morris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 36. See also Patrick Gray, “Points and Lines: Thematic Parallelism in the Letter of James and the Testament of Job,” *New Testament Studies* 50 (2004): 406–24. One does not have to accept all of his conclusions to realize that Gray demonstrates the proximity of James to wisdom literature in general.

Lenski observes the following connections with wisdom literature: “James is concrete and not abstract in thought. . . . His figures and his illustrations are taken from rural life, from sea and sun, from domestic life and from public life. . . . James certainly loves *paronomasia*; he has an ear for alliteration, homoeoteleuton, and rhythm. . . . Some of [his statements] have Hebraistic parallelism.” R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle of St. James*, Commentary on the New Testament (Augsburg; Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 512.

¹⁴ The full data set appears in the Appendix as Table 2–A.

Matthew 8:17 This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.”	sickness indicative of spiritual weakness ¹⁵
Luke 5:15 But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities .	sickness
John 5:5 One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years.	physical weakness
Romans 8:26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness . For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.	generic or spiritual weakness
Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses , but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.	spiritual weakness
Hebrews 5:2 He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness .	spiritual weakness

Second, the NT book that most closely matches the hortatory tone of James—namely, Hebrews—consistently uses *ἀσθένεια* to refer to *spiritual* weakness. Only the Gospels, written *after* the book of James, use *ἀσθένεια* to refer consistently to sickness.¹⁶ Such data are inconclusive, however, because they are equivocal. Readers who prefer to see James’s usage in the context of Jesus’ healing ministry will gravitate toward interpreting the weakness in James as physical sickness. Those who emphasize the genre and OT context of James will view *ἀσθένεια* as generic or spiritual weakness.

Third, while *ἀσθενέω* slightly edges out the individual occurrences of other words pertaining to sickness in the Gospels, it does so in a qualified fashion. See Table 3 below. For instance, Luke 4:40 uses *ἀσθενέω* qualified by *νόσος*, *disease* (*ὅσοι εἶχον ἀσθενοῦντας νόσοις ποικίλαις*). In this location at least, Luke treats *ἀσθενέω* as a broad weakness that requires further limitation in order to be clear.

Table 3—Frequency of the most common words for “sickness” in the Gospel accounts

<i>ἀσθένεια</i>	8x
<i>ἀσθενέω</i>	16x
<i>βάσανος</i>	3x
<i>μαλακία</i>	3x
<i>μάστιξ</i>	5x
<i>νόσος</i>	11x

¹⁵ Leon Morris represents a significant number of commentators when he says, “Isaiah 53 is generally understood as setting forth in prophetic form some of the great truths of the atonement for sin brought about by the death of Jesus; it is unusual to see it applied to illness rather than to moral evil. . . . There is certainly the thought that the final answer to sickness is in the cross.” *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 198.

¹⁶ It is a bit surprising to see numerous commentators claiming “James likely borrowed his language from the Gospels, where it nearly always refers to physical sickness” (Bowden, 69). This assessment is anachronistic. All of the Gospels were written after James.

The verb ἀσθενέω occurs much more frequently than its cognate noun (approximately 100x in the LXX and GNT combined), and it corroborates the noun-use data. The OT usage points strongly toward general weakness or spiritual weakness, *not* sickness; the Gospels use ἀσθενέω to refer to sickness; and the epistles concur with the OT usage by inclining toward either generic or spiritual weakness depending on the context.

The data in Table 4 below illustrates the breadth of OT and NT usage. Significantly, *no* passage in the OT uses ἀσθενέω to refer unequivocally to sickness. Although Daniel 8:27 might appear to be an exception, the context implies that while emotional/spiritual/physical exhaustion is in view, sickness is not. It is unlikely that the passage points to Daniel’s experiencing a viral or bacterial infection following his visions. A parallel incident occurs in Daniel 10:17–19, which clarifies that the weakness involved is a weakness of spirit and body, not sickness.

“How can my lord’s servant talk with my lord? For now no strength remains in me, and no breath is left in me.” Again one having the appearance of a man touched me and strengthened me. And he said, “O man greatly loved, fear not, peace be with you; be strong and of good courage.” And as he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, “Let my lord speak, for you have strengthened me” (Dn 10:17-19).

Table 4—Representative uses of the verb ἀσθενέω¹⁷

Judges 16:7 Samson said to her, “If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, then I shall become weak and be like any other man.”	physical weakness
2 Samuel 3:1 There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David. And David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker .	generic weakness
Job 4:4 Your words have upheld him who was stumbling , and you have made firm the feeble knees.	spiritual weakness
Psalms 18:36 You gave a wide place for my steps under me, and my feet did not slip .	spiritual weakness
Psalms 26:1 Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering .	spiritual weakness
Psalms 31:10 For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away.	spiritual weakness
Psalms 88:9 My eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call upon you, O LORD; I spread out my hands to you.	spiritual weakness
Isaiah 7:4 And say to him, ‘Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah.	spiritual weakness
Jeremiah 6:21 Therefore thus says the LORD: “Behold, I will lay before this people stumbling blocks against which they shall stumble ; fathers and sons together, neighbor and friend shall perish.”	generic weakness (lowness)

¹⁷ The fuller data set appears in the Appendix under the designation Table 4–A.

Ezekiel 17:6 and it sprouted and became a low spreading vine, and its branches turned toward him, and its roots remained where it stood. So it became a vine and produced branches and put out boughs.	lowness
Daniel 8:27 And I, Daniel, was overcome and lay sick for some days. Then I rose and went about the king's business, but I was appalled by the vision and did not understand it.	generic weakness (lowness)
Daniel 10:17 How can my lord's servant talk with my lord? For now no strength remains in me, and no breath is left in me.	generic weakness (lowness)
Zechariah 12:8 On that day the LORD will protect the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the feeblest among them on that day shall be like David, and the house of David shall be like God, like the angel of the LORD, going before them.	generic weakness
Matthew 10:8 Heal the sick , raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay.	sickness
Mark 6:56 And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.	sickness or weakness
Luke 4:40 Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them.	sickness
John 4:46 So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill .	sickness
Acts 9:37 In those days she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room.	sickness
Acts 20:35 In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”	fiscally weak
Romans 4:19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. (Rom 4:19 ESV)	spiritual weakness
Romans 14:1 As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.	spiritual weakness
1 Corinthians 8:11–12 And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak , you sin against Christ.	spiritual weakness
Philippians 2:26 for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill .	sickness

Knowing (1) that James follows the genre patterns of OT wisdom literature, (2) that James was the earliest NT book, and (3) that James did not borrow from the *written* gospel accounts (it is impossible to determine how stylized the oral gospel was at the point of James's writing) leaves the

reasonable inference that James 5:14 may refer to spiritual weakness. This claim becomes stronger if James drew from wisdom literature for his vocabulary. The passages in Job and Psalms tend to use ἀσθενέω to reflect discouragement, depression, emotional weariness, or indecision—all of which connect with some form of spiritual weakness. Table 5 summarizes the scriptural data by usage.

Table 5—Summary of ἀσθενέω

Old Testament	ἀσθενέω as generic or spiritual weakness	62/62x
New Testament	ἀσθενέω as sickness	16/33x
	ἀσθενέω as generic or spiritual weakness	14/33x
	ἀσθενέω equivocal	3/33x

Finally, some commentators recognize that Second Clement drew heavily from James in framing his own *Epistle to the Corinthians* (ca. A.D. 130–160).¹⁸ As Table 6 indicates, this epistle from a second-century church father has important implications for the interpretation of James 5.

Table 6—The Evidence from Second Clement

<i>Corinthians XVII.1–3</i>	
<p>Μετανοήσωμεν οὖν ἐξ ὅλης καρδίας, ἵνα μή τις ἡμῶν παραπόληται. εἰ γὰρ ἐντολὰς ἔχομεν ἵνα καὶ κατηχεῖν, πόσω μᾶλλον ψυχὴν ἤδη γινώσκουσιν τὸν θεὸν οὐ δεῖ ἀπόλλυσθαι; συλλάβωμεν οὖν ἑαυτοῖς καὶ τοὺς ἀσθενοῦντας ἀνάγειν περὶ τὸ ἀγαθόν, ὅπως σωθῶμεν ἅπαντες καὶ ἐπιστρέψωμεν ἀλλήλους καὶ νοθετήσωμεν. καὶ μὴ μόνον ἄρτι δοκῶμεν πιστεύειν καὶ προσέχειν ἐν τῷ νοθετεῖσθαι ἡμᾶς ὑπὸ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων . . .</p>	<p>Therefore, let us repent from our whole heart lest anyone of us might perish along the way. For if we have commands that we might do them, how much more isn't it necessary that we keep from perishing a soul which already knows God? Therefore, let us help each other and be leading back those who are weak concerning the good, in order that we all might be saved and let us turn back one another and exhort. And let us not only seem to be believing and to be taking heed now while we are being exhorted by the elders . . .</p>

Verbal parallels to James (highlighted above) include the expressions “anyone of,” “soul,” “the weak,” “be saved,” “turn back,” and “elders,” and additional conceptual parallels (bolded above) include repentance, perishing, the one who knows God/the truth, helping through admonishing/exhorting, and “not merely seeming to believe.” Clement uses wording similar to James to express the spiritual condition of believers. He is highly concerned with those who are spiritually discouraged and beginning to swerve from the truth. While Clement may not have James 5 in mind, he demonstrates that a writer could use the same vocabulary as James to express a spiritual state in a context similar to James’s.

¹⁸ W. E. Oesterley, *The General Epistle of James*, in vol. 4 of *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 386.

The Meaning of κάμνω

The evidence that κάμνω (James 5:15) provides is even more interesting. κάμνω occurs only four times in Scripture—twice in the OT; twice in the NT. Table 7 provides all of these citations.

Table 7—Total occurrences of κάμνω in Scripture

κάμνων τῇ ψυχῇ μου στένων ἐπαφήσω ἐπ’ αὐτὸν τὰ ῥήματά μου λαλήσω πικρία ψυχῆς μου συνεχόμενος (Job 10:1)	I <u>loathe</u> my life; I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.
λίσσομαι κάμνων καὶ τί ποιήσας (Job 17:2)	I pray <u>being discouraged</u> and having done what? ¹⁹
ἀναλογίσασθε γὰρ τὸν τοιαύτην ὑπομεμενηκότα ὑπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτωλῶν εἰς ἑαυτὸν ἀντιλογίαν, ἵνα μὴ κάμνητε ταῖς ψυχαῖς ὑμῶν ἐκλυόμενοι (Hebrews 12:3)	Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not <u>grow</u> <u>weary</u> or fainthearted.
καὶ ἡ εὐχὴ τῆς πίστεως σώσει τὸν κάμνοντα καὶ ἐγερεῖ αὐτὸν ὁ κύριος· καὶ ἁμαρτίας ἧς πεποιηκώς, ἀφεθήσεται αὐτῷ (James 5:15)	And the prayer of faith will save <u>the one who is sick</u> , and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

In every instance, with the possible exception of James 5:15, κάμνω refers to being bowed down in spirit.²⁰ Since spiritual weakness is already a well-attested use of ἀσθενέω, κάμνω aligns well with this established meaning.²¹ The burden of proof would seem to rest on those who would choose a meaning for κάμνω not attested elsewhere in Scripture. However, James likely knew the broader range of meaning for κάμνω that was current in the first century. And this broader range of meaning complicates the simplicity of this conclusion. As Liddell & Scott indicate, κάμνω could mean either “to be sick or suffering” or “to be distressed, meet with disaster.”²² Again, the lexical data are equivocal.

¹⁹ Modern English versions all follow the MT here instead of the LXX. The Hebrew says :יִנְיָ לְךָ הַמְּרִיבִים עָמְדָה עֵינִי אֶל־מִן (Surely there are mockers about me, and my eye dwells on their provocation).

²⁰ In the apocryphal books of Maccabees and Wisdom of Solomon, κάμνω does address physical distress rather than spiritual distress. Moo finds this determinative, and James’s connection with wisdom literature makes this a possibility. Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 243.

²¹ Incidentally, outside the NT, κάμνω appears to maintain the same basic meaning, as various texts demonstrate. See for example Chrysostom’s paraphrase of Paul, Κάμνω, οὐκέτι ἐγώ, ἰσχύει δὲ ἐν ἐμοὶ Χριστός (*Oratio de epiphania* 2062.452). Chrysostom seems to be referring to physical weakness, not sickness, and he is conflating ideas from Philipians 4:13, Galatians 2:20, and possibly elsewhere.

Another text extends κάμνω to old age: Ἀδελφὸς παρέβαλε γέροντι δοκιμωτάτῳ, καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ· Κάμνω. Καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ ὁ γέρων· Κάθου εἰς τὸ κελλίον σου, καὶ ὁ θεὸς παρέχει σοι ἄνεσιν. *Apophthegmata Eccl., Gnom. (collection anonyma) (e cod Coislin 126)*. Both of the above were accessed May 9, 2016 from <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/>.

²² H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), *op cit*.

The Meaning of ἀλείφω

Oil had several basic functions in the ancient world. In the uses that could be relevant to James 5, oil could be used for (1) medicine, (2) ceremonial/sacramental anointing, and (3) cosmetic or social function. Commentators who accept either of the first two positions argue strenuously against the other position as contextually illogical. For example, Moo and Kent accept a sacramental anointing and so contend that a medicinal use does not fit James’s context well. They observe that (1) oil heals a relatively small number of ailments yet was commanded to be applied in all cases, and (2) a medicinal function would better be met by a doctor than an elder.²³ On the other hand Lenski argues that since James uses ἀλείφω instead of χρίω, he was not drawing attention to a sacramental anointing.²⁴ Moreover, it is inconsistent for a sacramental anointing to be in use at this (earliest) stage of church history. No record of such an anointing exists in Acts or Paul, though both give abundant testimony concerning the existence and proper protocols for the use of sign gifts.

The third perspective on the anointing believes that James is referring to a social grace that is designed to refresh and cheer one who is discouraged or otherwise weak. This position takes its evidence from both of the critiques of the previous two views, and it also argues from the prevailing NT use of ἀλείφω. Table 8 cites all of the occurrences of ἀλείφω in the NT. It shows that the bulk of the evidence lies in favor of social custom over against a sacramental or medicinal view. In six out of eight instances ἀλείφω refers to social custom that included cosmetic adornment and refreshment among its purposes. Only once is a medicinal or sacramental meaning certain.

Table 8—ἀλείφω in the New Testament

Matthew 6:17 σὺ δὲ νηστεύων ἀλειψαί σου τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ τὸ πρόσωπόν σου νίψαι,	social, physical refreshing
Mark 6:13 καὶ δαιμόνια πολλὰ ἐξέβαλλον, καὶ ἤλειφον ἐλαίῳ πολλοὺς ἀρρώστους καὶ ἐθεράπευον.	medicinal or sacramental
Mark 16:1 Καὶ διαγενομένου τοῦ σαββάτου Μαρία ἡ Μαγδαληνὴ καὶ Μαρία ἡ [τοῦ] Ἰακώβου καὶ Σαλώμῃ ἡγόρασαν ἀρώματα ἵνα ἐλθοῦσαι ἀλείψωσιν αὐτόν.	social, cosmetic embalming
Luke 7:38 καὶ στήσα ὀπίσω παρὰ τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ κλαίουσα τοῖς δάκρυσιν ἤρξατο βρέχειν τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ καὶ ταῖς θριξίν τῆς κεφαλῆς αὐτῆς ἐξέμασεν καὶ κατεφίλει τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ καὶ ἤλειφεν τῷ μύρῳ.	social, physical refreshing
Luke 7:46 ἐλαίῳ τὴν κεφαλὴν μου οὐκ ἤλειψας · αὕτη δὲ μύρῳ ἤλειψεν τοὺς πόδας μου.	social, physical refreshing
John 11:2 ἦν δὲ Μαριὰμ ἡ ἀλείψασα τὸν κύριον μύρῳ καὶ ἐκμάξασα τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ ταῖς θριξίν αὐτῆς, ἧς ὁ ἀδελφὸς Λάζαρος ἡσθένει.	social, physical refreshing

²³ Moo and Kent take the anointing as purely symbolic and explicitly reject medicinal and other uses for this verse, See Moo, 177–81; Homer A. Kent Jr., *Faith that Works: Studies in the Epistle of James* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1986), 188–89.

²⁴ Lenski, 660–61.

John 12:3 Ἡ οὖν Μαριάμ λαβοῦσα λίτρον μύρου νάρδου πιστικῆς πολυτίμου ἡλείψεν τοὺς πόδας τοῦ Ἰησοῦ καὶ ἐξέμαξεν ταῖς θριξίν αὐτῆς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ· ἡ δὲ οἰκία ἐπληρώθη ἐκ τῆς ὁσμῆς τοῦ μύρου.	social, physical refreshing
James 5:14 ἀσθενεῖ τις ἐν ὑμῖν, προσκαλεσάσθω τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους τῆς ἐκκλησίας καὶ προσευξάσθωσαν ἐπ’ αὐτὸν ἀλείψαντες [αὐτὸν] ἐλαίῳ ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου.	in question

At this point the evidence is beginning to accumulate. While each isolated argument might be equivocal, in each case the stronger evidence lies on the side of a spiritual or general weakness being addressed by the body of Christ through a combination of prayer and social grace.

The Connection between James 5 and the Rest of the Book

The theme of James seems to lie closely along the lines of *proofs of genuine faith*.²⁵ Table 9 summarizes the application of this theme to the entirety of the book. While it is certainly possible that 5:13–18 treats the attitude of faith toward physical sickness, it seems to be more consistent with the spiritual nature of the book to see this crucial section as addressing crises of faith. In other words, James seems to close his book with the vital topic: *what should I do if my faith is struggling—if I am disheartened?*

Table 9—James: A Study in Faith²⁶

James 1:1–4	Faith considers the troubles that we face in life to be a cause for rejoicing.
James 1:5–8	Faith faces the pressures of uncertainty and ignorance by asking God for wisdom.
James 1:9–11	Faith maintains a biblical perspective on self-worth.
James 1:12–15	Faith endures temptation without falsely accusing God of trying to harm us.
James 1:16–18	Faith recognizes that God is the source of all good.
James 1:19–21	Faith rests in the justice of God and wisely suspends its own right to judge.
James 1:22–25	Faith intentionally applies what it claims to believe about Scripture to life.
James 1:26–27	Faith generates external religious activity that reflects true internal worship.
James 2:1–9	Faith views others impartially, discerning correctly.
James 2:10–13	Faith seeks a consistent response to the law of God.
James 2:14–26	Faith works.
James 3:1	Faith accepts the justice of God.
James 3:2–11	Faith achieves a victory in speech that is not naturally attainable.
James 3:12–18	Faith aspires to and acquires true wisdom.
James 4:1–6	Faith recognizes and removes the source of conflict—selfishness.
James 4:6–10	Faith receives the grace of God by submitting humbly to the God of grace.
James 4:11–12	Faith lets God’s law, and not our own opinion, be the judge.

²⁵ Kent’s commentary title, *Faith That Works*, indicates his concurrence.

²⁶ This table reflects the author’s own exposition of James.

James 4:13–17	Faith rejects self-sufficiency and rests instead on the providence of God.
James 5:1–6	Faith acts justly because it recognizes true values.
James 5:7–11	Faith endures until Christ’s return.
James 5:12	Faith follows God, not culture, in speaking the truth.
James 5:13–18	Faith solves crises of faith biblically through the intervening prayer of spiritual leaders.
James 5:19–20	Faith restores sinning fellow believers.

James teaches his readers that genuine faith is not immune to frustration, despondency, and even depression; however, he urges the crucial thought that genuine faith looks to God (and his divinely ordained solutions) even when facing crises of faith.²⁷ In other words, God’s people may question him at times due to the severe trials and circumstances of life, but if they are truly God’s people, they cannot abide the vacillation of spirit that they sense in themselves, and they turn to Scripture for the solution. Those who merely appear to be Christian face the same crisis of “faith” and turn entirely away from God—renouncing him completely. Those who genuinely trust in God cry out in the agony of their pain, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

Two crucial connections look back to James 5:7–12 and forward to James 5:19–20. First, one of the great stresses on faith is the lack of evident victory. If James’s immediate audience already felt the tension of an unrealized hope (5:7), those who follow nearly 2,000 years later experience this frustration even more. As people of faith consider the apparent inactivity of God in their world, their faith is challenged. James uses the illustrations of the OT prophets and of Job to counteract the all-too-human tendency to become disillusioned with the truth of the gospel. While Job suffered a physical ailment in the boils that Satan introduced, it is the crisis of faith and Job’s patience in the midst of that crisis that James seems to be addressing.

A brief recapitulation of the evidence of the terms common to James and Job illumines James 5:13–16. Table 10 depicts how the LXX text of Job uses ἀσθεν- and κάμνω.

Table 10—James and Job

Your words have upheld him who was stumbling , and you have made firm the feeble knees. But now it has come to you, and you are impatient; it touches you, and you are dismayed. (Job 4:4–5)
I loathe my life; I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. (Job 10:1)
I pray, being discouraged , and what should I do? (Job 17:2, translated from the LXX)
<i>They cut</i> the shaft of a valley from a dusty place, and they having forgotten the right way languish away from mortal man. (Job 28:4, translated from the LXX)
He seals up the hand of every man, that all men whom he made may know his own weakness . (Job 37:7)

²⁷ Thomas Ice and Robert Dean Jr. articulate this concept as well: “The entire thrust of James, and especially this last chapter, is on patience (5:7, 8, 10) and endurance (5:11).” They also note, “There are excellent biblical grounds for understanding this passage to be talking about what to do if and when a believer is growing weary.” *Overrun by Demons: The Church’s New Preoccupation with the Demonic* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1990), 172.

In Job 4 Eliphaz rebukes Job, saying, “When other people have been discouraged and ready to give up, you have given good counsel, but now that trouble comes to you, you are despondent.” Both the Greek and Hebrew underlying this translation point to a slackness, weakness, or bowed down condition attributable to emotional/spiritual discouragement. The *reason* for the discouragement is not the focus of Job 4:4–6. The dismay itself is the focus. As the various English translations suggest, the imagery in Job 28:4 is poetic and difficult to grasp, but the weakness in view in the verse is not sickness. It could refer to a general wearing away of life, a vacillation of mind or spirit, or other emotional/spiritual discouragement. Job 37:7 differs in the MT and LXX. The MT makes the referent *God* and has “his work” in the place of “his own weakness.” Both Job 10:1 and 17:2 (in the LXX) pertain to emotional and spiritual despondency. What this evidence seems to imply is this: when James points to Job’s patience, he is doing so in light of the crisis of faith that Job endured.

Second, the context that follows James 5:13–18 also points to a crisis of faith. While most biblical texts mark vv. 19–20 as a distinct paragraph, James may not be starting a completely new idea. Rather, he seems to be summarizing, extending, and drawing a conclusion from the previous section. The following key points emerge: (1) the danger of swerving from the truth exists; (2) other believers need to participate in the spiritual life of the one who is so endangered; and (3) successful spiritual interdiction in the life of one who is deviating from the faith results in a rescued soul. This may further expound the intervention described in James 5:14–16.

The τῆς + Situation + Response Connection

James 5:13 uses a grammatical pattern common to the rest of the book. Table 11 illustrates the other instances of this formula. In each of the other instances, James provides a particular situation connected with the subject, *anyone*. When James describes a result of the main verb (with the possible exception of 5:14), that result is a promise conditioned by nothing other than faith. This might suggest that the effectiveness of the prayer of faith in 5:15 is likewise unconditioned beyond faith. But if so, James 5:15 is not true.

Table 11—*The τῆς Formula in James*

			Situation	Response	Result
1:5	anyone	of you	lacks wisdom	let him ask God	it will be given him
3:3	anyone	among you	is wise	let him show works	N/A
5:13	anyone	among you	suffering hardship	let him pray	N/A
5:13	anyone		cheerful	let him sing	N/A
5:14	anyone	among you	weak	let him call the elders	will save, will be forgiven, will raise up
5:19	anyone	among you	wanders from the truth	N/A	N/A
5:19–20	anyone		should turn him	let him know	will save soul from death will cover a multitude of sins

The parallel expression in the τίς-situation-response-result chain implies an assured outcome, but the reader finds exactly the opposite—the prayer of faith usually does *not* heal a sick person. Thus the interpreter who sees sickness as James’s primary referent must introduce qualifications and concepts foreign to the context in order to explain the failure of prayer to achieve its intended result. James’s grammatical pattern conveys a correlation between action and result.

The Connection between James 5 and Hebrews 12

Important lexical and logical connections exist between Hebrews 12 and James 5. Table 12 highlights a few of these connections. Remember that *κἀμνω* occurs only twice in the NT.

Table 12—James/Hebrews connections

<p>¹³ Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.</p>	<p>³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.</p>
<p>¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.</p>	<p>⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.</p> <p>⁵ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him.</p>
<p>¹⁵ And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. <u>And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.</u></p>	<p>⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.”</p> <p>⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?</p>
<p>¹⁶ <u>Therefore, confess</u> your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. (Jam 5:13-16)</p>	<p>⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.</p> <p>⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?</p> <p>¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.</p>
	<p>¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.</p> <p>¹² Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees,</p> <p>¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. (Heb 12:1-13)</p>

Those two occurrences are in Hebrews 12 and James 5. Hebrews also picks up the concept of healing as redressing the condition of spiritual discouragement (12:13). Moreover, Hebrews 12 indicates that some of this spiritual weariness and despondency stems from unconfessed sin that eats away at a believer’s faith (12:5–11). This concern parallels James’s admonishment that confession may be

necessary to healing. It seems stronger than mere coincidence that Hebrews uses terminology exactly parallel to James in describing a spiritual situation that matches *one of the three viable interpretations* of James.

Hebrews 12 follows Hebrews 11. That much is obvious. But Hebrews 11 stems from a long argument concerning the necessity of abiding in the faith (the confidence [3:3]; the hope [3:3]; the promise [4:1]) once professed. Hebrews 11 provides a series of illustrations from the lives of those who had reason to renounce faith on the basis of their circumstances, but who refused to do so. Hebrews 12 strengthens this argument with the final example of Jesus Christ. Is spiritual discouragement likely in the face of trials (12:3)? Absolutely, but believers must hold to the faith nonetheless. The overall context and placement of Hebrews 12 in the middle of an extended homily on faith fits very well with James’s overall context and placement of chapter 5.²⁸

*Intertextuality*²⁹

Intertextuality describes the way that literary works interrelate. More narrowly, intertextuality indicates that one literary work has alluded to another while expecting the reader to incorporate broader components of the cited work. The writer expects his readers to be sufficiently knowledgeable that they not only understand his allusion but also incorporate more of the plot or meaning of the previous work than he specifically references. If a modern writer dropped “*veni, vidi, vici*,” into his story, he might mean nothing more than “I came, I saw, I conquered.” On the other hand he might want his readers to draw parallels between the story that they are presently reading and the life of Julius Caesar. The second, deliberate use by the author would be an example of intertextuality.

James alludes to four Old Testament figures: Abraham (2:21–23), Rahab (2:25), Job (5:11), and Elijah (5:17).³⁰ In each case, James assumes that his reader understands the details from the life of the OT saint that are relevant to his point. He does not thoroughly develop how the OT figure undergirds the theological point but expects the listener to supply the necessary information.

Having given his already problematic and terse description of “weakness” and its cure, James drops Elijah into the text as an illustration of his point. Elijah, after all, performed a miracle with oil in 1 Kings 17:14–16, and he raised a dead child in 1 Kings 17:17–24 (not through the use of oil, however). They are the most natural possible points of connection, and they would enhance James’s point in verse 16 (“The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working”). But James does

²⁸ It might not be incidental that commentators have recognized both Hebrews and James to be close to a homiletic or sermon structure. “The strong tone of pastoral exhortation” points to James’s use of the rhetorical category of homily (Moo, 36). Carson and Moo conclude in reference to Hebrews, “The wealth of rhetorical devices in Hebrews has suggested to many (probably rightly) that this work was originally a homily.” D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 596.

²⁹ See Leroy A. Huizenga, “The Old Testament in the New, Intertextuality and Allegory,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 38/1 (2015): 17–35 for a discussion of the adaptation of secular literary-critical terms by biblical scholars. Conservatives use *intertextuality* to describe the full range of allusion, quotation, and literary and theological relationships among the biblical books.

³⁰ See Giovanni Claudio Bottini, “Continuity and Innovation in Biblical Tradition: Elijah from 1 Kgs 17–18 to Jas 5:17–18,” *Studia Biblica Slovaca* 11/2 (2019): 126.

not allude to either of these incidents. In addition, James could have used Elisha as his illustration. Elisha raised the Shunammite woman’s son (2 Kings 4:18–37, without oil) and healed Naaman (1 Kings 5:1–14, also without oil). So at least three classic examples of intercessory prayer leading to healing from physical sickness were available to James, but he passed over all of these to draw from Elijah’s prayer for rain. Why? At least two possibilities exist.

Texts that Span the Healing

James may have chosen this illustration because Elijah’s two prayers about rain bracket the incident in which he healed the widow’s son. Table 13 depicts this first form of intertextuality. As a form of *inclusio*, this solution is stylistically and logically pleasing, but introduces a problem into James’s argument. James draws attention to Elijah’s being “a man with a nature like ours.” In fact, this little detail overarches James’s use of Elijah as an example.

Table 13—Elijah’s Prayer as an Inclusio with the Incident of Healing

1 Kings 17:1	Elijah predicts absence of rain
1 Kings 17:2–24	Elijah’s miracles for the widow of Zarephath, including the healing of her son
1 Kings 18:1–40	Conflict with prophets at Mt. Carmel with the expectation that God would send rain
1 Kings 18:41–46	Prayer for rain and its arrival

But there is no evidence of this “like-passion” quality in Elijah in 1 Kings 17–18. In these two chapters, Elijah speaks very matter-of-factly, and the OT develops no psychological depth to him with the possible exception of his mocking the prophets of Baal. He shows no fear in declaring the famine to Ahab in the first place (17:1). He shows no doubt or anxiety when the brook Cherith dries up (17:7). He exhibits no worry or frustration when he left the territory of Israel to go to a Gentile nation (17:10). He displays no amazement or wonder at the miracle of food (17:14–16). He has no hesitation at the raising of the widow’s son (17:21). He exhibits no uncertainty in his returning to Ahab (18:2). He shows no fear in rebuking Ahab to his face (18:18). He indicates no unbelief or vacillation in confronting hundreds of false prophets (18:20–40). So far, Elijah seems almost super-human. He’s a spiritual giant—impassive, utterly courageous, and unwavering.

In other words, overemphasizing the possible intertextuality of 1 Kings 17–18 with James 5 seems to miss the point that James is trying to make. The reader would come away with a far different conclusion (namely, that rare, specially-chosen, ultra-spiritual prophet types can pray, and God will hear) than the one to which James points (that frail, spiritually-exhausted, spiritually discouraged people of faith can pray, and God will still hear).

Texts that Connect Causally

A second solution exists. James definitely draws upon Elijah’s prayer for rain, but James provides the direction in which the intertextuality should move—forward into 1 Kings 19. By introducing Elijah through terms of weakness (James 5:17a) then citing Elijah’s prayer concerning

rain (James 5:17b–18), James brackets the rain/flight from Jezebel incident, not the rain/healing of the widow’s son incident. Table 14 depicts this movement in the story.

Table 14—Elijah’s Prayer and Flight as Intertextual with James 5

1 Kings 17:1–24	Elijah predicts absence of rain & exercises faith
1 Kings 18:1–40	Elijah prays for rain and exercises faith
1 Kings 19:1–21	Elijah flees in fear and discouragement

This analysis of Elijah’s work is less literarily satisfying because it does not emphasize the *inclusio* outlined above, but it provides the greater logical and contextual explanatory power on the basis of James’s argument. In particular, in the middle of Elijah’s spiritual discouragement, he could not escape such weakness through simply “bucking up” on his own. He was spiritually despondent (1 Ki. 19:4), physically exhausted (1 Ki. 19:5), thinking irrationally, and not exercising the evident, implicit faith he had previously exhibited (1 Ki. 19:10, 14), and feeling completely alone spiritually (1 Ki. 19:10, 14). Elijah’s complaint (1 Ki. 19:10, 14) included (1) the futility of faithfulness, (2) the powerlessness of the truth, (3) an expressed feeling of isolation, and (4) fear. This fits very well with James’s description of Elijah as a man of like-passion (ὁμοιοπαθής).

God’s response to Elijah prefigures James’s instruction to the church. God provided the physical nourishment that Elijah needed (1 Ki. 19:5–7), a point paralleled by James’s anointing with oil (5:14). God provided spiritual companionship (1 Ki. 19:5, 7, 9, 13), a point paralleled by James’s bringing in of elders (5:14). God also addressed Elijah’s wrong thinking through the combined exhibition of his power and command (1 Ki. 19:11–12, 15–18). Essentially, God strengthened and recommissioned Elijah, told him he was not alone, and provided for his physical needs. These issues parallel James’s requirement for spiritually mature people to intervene in the life of others and deal with their physical, social, and spiritual needs in the process of restoration. This second treatment of intertextuality connects 1 Kings and James much more directly and leaves fewer inferences to be supplied by the interpreter.

Problems with Intertextuality

Intertextual analysis suffers the persistent problem that the extent of an author’s allusion or borrowing is not always clear.³¹ The scope of information that author expects the reader or listener to supply from the earlier text remains unstated. So readers will vary in their assessment of how the earlier text supports the present one.³² This makes biblical theology crucial to interpretation. Without the

³¹ Where an author does not make his borrowing known at all, attempts to draw connections between two pieces of literature risks succumbing to the *post hoc* fallacy. This is evident throughout most source critical works on the Gospels.

³² This is especially evident in the promising-sounding article by Mariam Kamell Kovalishyn, “The Prayer of Elijah in James 5: An Example of Intertextuality,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137/4 (2018): 1027–45. Kovalishyn identifies the whole of 1 Kings 17:1–18:46 as the source of James’s allusion, but she develops a summary of the entire chapter in James from this section in 1 Kings—seeing connections with a care for widows, renunciation of idolatry, effectiveness of prayer in healing, and steadfastness in prayer.

“fences” established by a careful interpretation of the previous text, the interpreter has a higher probability of straying into unwarranted theological conclusions. Without the historical and theological context of the passage alluded to *and* the context of the passage making the allusion, the interpreter runs the risk of importing too much, too little, or the wrong information into a current text.³³

Intertextuality does not settle the interpretive difficulties in James 5, but it does help the reader understand how Elijah may relate to James’s argument. Intertextuality also implies that James 5 treats spiritual discouragement or a crisis of faith.

The fact that James chose *not* to refer to Elijah’s healing ministry—where such a reference would have naturally and decisively undergirded an argument for healing in the church—calls the physical-healing perspective into question. The fact that James draws attention to Elijah’s weakness in relation to his faith and faithfulness points toward a spiritual-discouragement view. The fact that God addresses in Elijah’s own thinking some of the same concerns that James addresses in relation to “the prayer of faith will save the weak” seems to strengthen the spiritual-discouragement view.

Conclusion

The view that James addresses spiritual weakness, not physical sickness, is reasonable and theologically consistent. While physical trials can produce spiritual ones, James’s focus is on the *faith* of his readers, not their *health*. He does not encourage the perspective that God will heal the physical illnesses of his people in an ongoing fashion throughout the church age. Prayers for the sick *do* sometimes result in healing, even in recent days, but these prayers do not capitalize on the teaching of James so much as on the genuine necessity of faith, which is incumbent on all believers, and on the unchanging graciousness of God.

However, this interpretation of the text is not certain. The evidence throughout is equivocal. The reader will need to decide where the preponderance of the evidence lies. Table 15 summarizes the preceding arguments and marks the view best supported by each piece of evidence. It does not seek to prejudice the reader by implying that there is *no* evidence to support the alternative position. It simply portrays the categories in which the preponderance of the evidence supports a position.

Table 15—Summary and Tabulation of Evidence

Evidence	Physical Weakness	Spiritual Weakness
The lack of need to qualify the prayer of faith with tacit conditions		•
The meaning of ἀσθεν- in wisdom literature		•

³³ Conservative hermeneutics texts tend to address the concept of intertextuality (often without using the word) in sections that address the New Testament’s use of the Old or typology, allegory, and allusion. See, for instance, Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 703–10; Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 323–44.

The meaning of ἀσθεν- in the Gospels	•
Genre alignment of James with wisdom literature	•
Interpretation by Clement of Rome	•
Uniform meaning of κάμνω in OT and NT	•
Common and typical meaning of ἀλείφω	•
Context of James 5:13–18 in relation to James as a whole	•
Context of James 5:13–18 in relation to James 5:7–12	•
Context of James 5:13–18 in relation to James 5:19–20	•
The τις formula in James	•
Connection of James 5 and Hebrews 12	•
Intertextuality	•

The practical implications of expanding one’s interpretation to include a spiritual-discouragement view are immense. First, if James is *not* addressing sickness, the church has a reasonable explanation for the apparent failure of his recommended procedure in practical attempts to heal the sick. This recognition would in no way prevent the church from continuing to pray for its sick or minimize the importance of such intercession. It would explain, however, how an unqualified scriptural command and promise have met such stubborn resistance in the facts of everyday experience. If the church has misinterpreted James, it has misunderstood both the command and promise that God has actually given.

Second, if spiritual weakness is in view, the church must train its saints to seek help when facing crises of faith. Instead of continuing a maverick, individualistic silence, believers must interact on a deeply personal, spiritual level in times of spiritual distress. James does not depict spiritual discouragement as unusual. In fact, his use of Elijah as an illustration would prove that even spiritual giants and great men of God can become so disillusioned that they wish to quit ministry altogether. James provides the answer that is consistent with the message of his entire letter: People of faith meet crises of faith by seeking the spiritually undergirding intercessory prayer of other believers.

Third, if the spiritual weakness view is correct, it provides a clear process of restoration. Spiritual discouragement or vacillation may have roots in physical causes (hence the need for the social grace of anointing with oil) or in spiritual causes (hence the need for confession of sin). Neglect of either of these areas may leave the discouragement intact. In addition, James 5 reveals that the spiritually discouraged individual may be so worn down that he is unable to pray effectively for himself. He *needs* the intercessory prayer of others. This is entirely consistent with what we find elsewhere in the NT (e.g., Gal 6:1).

Fourth, like all passages of Scripture James invites application of the principle to each era and culture in which believers find themselves. The discouraged or spiritually wavering brother might not find much encouragement in having oil poured on his head, but he does need men of God to surround him, get him out of bed, shaved, cleaned up, dressed up, and out for a good meal, an excursion to the lake, or some other socially stimulating activity while nurturing him spiritually. God knows that the distress of the heart may stem from multiple causes.

Fifth, on the spiritual side of the equation, James’s use of Elijah indicates that the discouraged or wavering individual may need direct confrontation of the false thinking (one of the sins he may need to confess) that has led to his spiritual enervation. God gently confronted Elijah’s complaints: (1) faithfulness is not futile because God has plans for the future; (2) truth is not powerlessness because it is backed by omnipotence; (3) isolation is an emotional perception but not a reality; and (4) fear is unwarranted because the Almighty knows your situation and still reigns and provides for his own. In similar fashion the spiritual leaders within the body of Christ need to confront the distorted thinking that leads to spiritual capitulation.

The combination of context and intertextuality could reorient the perspective of the church on the interpretation of James 5:13–18 and lead interpreters to conclude that James urges the following upon his readers:

Is anyone among you suffering, let him pray. Is anyone cheerful, let him sing.
Is anyone spiritually weak, let him call the elders of the church and let them pray for him anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.
And the prayer of faith will rescue the one who is despondent, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sin, it will be forgiven him.

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another in order that you may be spiritually healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful as it works.

Elijah was a man with the same emotions as we have, and he prayed that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months; and he prayed again, and heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its fruit.

Appendix

Table 2-A—Significant uses of the noun ἀσθένεια

Job 37:7 He seals up the hand of every man, that all men whom he made may know it .	generic weakness
Psalms 16:4 The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips.	generic weakness
Ecclesiastes 12:4 and the doors on the street are shut-- when the sound of the grinding is low , and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low—	generic weakness
Jeremiah 6:21 Therefore thus says the LORD: “Behold, I will lay before this people stumbling blocks against which they shall stumble; fathers and sons together, neighbor and friend shall perish.”	generic weakness
Jeremiah 18:23 Yet you, O LORD, know all their plotting to kill me. Forgive not their iniquity, nor blot out their sin from your sight. Let them be overthrown before you; deal with them in the time of your anger.	generic weakness
Matthew 8:17 This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.”	sickness indicative of spiritual weakness
Luke 5:15 But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities .	sickness
Luke 8:2 and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities : Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,	sickness
Luke 13:11 And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself.	physical weakness
Luke 13:12 When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, “Woman, you are freed from your disability .”	physical weakness
John 5:5 One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years.	physical weakness
John 11:4 But when Jesus heard it he said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”	sickness
Acts 28:9 And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured.	sickness
Romans 6:19 I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations . For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.	generic weakness
Romans 8:26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness . For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.	generic weakness
1 Corinthians 2:3 And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling,	generic weakness
1 Corinthians 15:43 It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness ; it is raised in power.	generic weakness

2 Corinthians 11:30 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness .	generic weakness
2 Corinthians 12:5 On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses--	generic weakness
2 Corinthians 12:9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness ." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses , so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.	generic weakness
2 Corinthians 12:10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses , insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.	generic weakness
2 Corinthians 13:4 For he was crucified in weakness , but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.	generic weakness
Galatians 4:13 You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first,	sickness
1 Timothy 5:23 (No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments .)	sickness
Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses , but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.	spiritual weakness
Hebrews 5:2 He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness .	spiritual weakness
Hebrews 7:28 For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.	spiritual weakness
Hebrews 11:34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness , became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.	generic weakness

Table 4-A—Uses of the verb ἀσθενέω

Judges 6:15 And he said to him, “Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house.”	generic weakness
Judges 16:7 Samson said to her, “If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, then I shall become weak and be like any other man.”	physical weakness
1 Samuel 2:4 The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength.	generic weakness
2 Samuel 3:1 There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David. And David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker .	generic weakness
Job 4:4 Your words have upheld him who was stumbling , and you have made firm the feeble knees.	spiritual weakness
Job 28:4 He opens shafts in a valley away from where anyone lives; they are forgotten by travelers; they hang in the air, far away from mankind; they swing to and fro .	vacillation
Psalms 9:3 When my enemies turn back, they stumble and perish before your presence.	spiritual weakness
Psalms 18:36 You gave a wide place for my steps under me, and my feet did not slip .	spiritual weakness
Psalms 26:1 Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering .	spiritual weakness
Psalms 27:2 When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes, it is they who stumble and fall.	spiritual weakness
Psalms 31:10 For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away. (Psa 31:10 ESV)	spiritual weakness
Psalms 58:7 Let them vanish like water that runs away; when he aims his arrows, let them be blunted .	generic weakness
Psalms 68:9 Rain in abundance, O God, you shed abroad; you restored your inheritance as it languished ;	generic weakness
Psalms 88:9 my eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call upon you, O LORD; I spread out my hands to you.	spiritual weakness
Psalms 105:37 Then he brought out Israel with silver and gold, and there was none among his tribes who stumbled .	generic weakness
Psalms 107:12 So he bowed their hearts down with hard labor; they fell down , with none to help.	physical weakness
Psalms 109:24 My knees are weak through fasting; my body has become gaunt, with no fat.	physical weakness
Proverbs 24:16 for the righteous falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked stumble in times of calamity.	spiritual weakness
Isaiah 7:4 And say to him, 'Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah.	spiritual weakness
Isaiah 44:12 The ironsmith takes a cutting tool and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry, and his strength fails ; he drinks no water and is faint.	generic weakness

Jeremiah 6:21 Therefore thus says the LORD: “Behold, I will lay before this people stumbling blocks against which they shall stumble ; fathers and sons together, neighbor and friend shall perish.”	generic weakness (lowness)
Jeremiah 18:15 But my people have forgotten me; they make offerings to false gods; they made them stumble in their ways, in the ancient roads, and to walk into side roads, not the highway.	generic weakness (lowness)
Jeremiah 46:6 The swift cannot flee away, nor the warrior escape; in the north by the river Euphrates they have stumbled and fallen. (cf. also vv. 12, 16)	generic weakness (lowness)
Lamentations 1:14 My transgressions were bound into a yoke; by his hand they were fastened together; they were set upon my neck; he caused my strength to fail ; the Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot withstand.	spiritual weakness
Ezekiel 17:6 and it sprouted and became a low spreading vine, and its branches turned toward him, and its roots remained where it stood. So it became a vine and produced branches and put out boughs.	lowness
Daniel 8:27 And I, Daniel, was overcome and lay sick for some days. Then I rose and went about the king’s business, but I was appalled by the vision and did not understand it.	generic weakness (lowness)
Daniel 10:17 How can my lord’s servant talk with my lord? For now no strength remains in me, and no breath is left in me.	generic weakness (lowness)
Daniel 11:19 Then he shall turn his face back toward the fortresses of his own land, but he shall stumble and fall, and shall not be found. cf. vv. 33, 34, 35, 41)	generic weakness (lowness)
Hosea 4:5 You shall stumble by day; the prophet also shall stumble with you by night; and I will destroy your mother.	spiritual weakness
Hosea 5:5 The pride of Israel testifies to his face; Israel and Ephraim shall stumble in his guilt; Judah also shall stumble with them.	spiritual weakness
Nahum 2:5 He remembers his officers; they stumble as they go, they hasten to the wall; the siege tower is set up.	generic weakness
Zechariah 12:8 On that day the LORD will protect the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the feeblest among them on that day shall be like David, and the house of David shall be like God, like the angel of the LORD, going before them.	generic weakness
Matthew 10:8 Heal the sick , raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay.	sickness
Matthew 25:36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.	equivocal: sick, weak, despondent
Mark 6:56 And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.	sickness or weakness
Luke 4:40 Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them.	sickness

John 4:46 So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill .	sickness
John 5:7 The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.”	weakness
John 11:1 Now a certain man was ill , Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (cf. vv. 2, 3, 6)	sickness
Acts 9:37 In those days she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room.	sickness
Acts 19:12 so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick , and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.	sickness
Acts 20:35 In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”	fiscally weak
Romans 4:19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. (Rom 4:19 ESV)	spiritual weakness
Romans 14:1 As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.	spiritual weakness
1 Corinthians 8:11–12 And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak , you sin against Christ.	spiritual weakness
2 Corinthians 11:29 Who is weak , and I am not weak ? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?	spiritual weakness
2 Corinthians 12:10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses , insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak , then I am strong.	generic weakness
Philippians 2:26 for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill .	sickness