

THE RICH MAN IN JAMES 2: DOES ANCIENT PATRONAGE ILLUMINE THE TEXT?

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Introduction

The episode of the gold-fingered man in splendid clothes and the filthy pauper in Jas 2:2-4 is typically used to show God's preference for the poor and condemnation of the wealthy.¹ Some authors disagree, seeing it instead as an illustration of "proper relations of rich and poor in Christian society" as outlined in Jas 2:1-13.² Because the section begins with a prohibition of *προσωπολημψία*, "favoritism," the passage is also considered an "argument against the sin of prejudice"³ or a condemnation of "snobbery."⁴

The following analysis suggests that the rich man of Jas 2 is portrayed as a potential patron of the Christian synagogue to which James was writing. Thus, I have come to agree with Bo Reicke that Jas 2:1-13 is a treatise on the "impropriety of currying favor with the rich".⁵

The client-patron relation, according to John H. Elliott, has received far less attention than it merits, "particularly on the part of students of early Christianity." He posits that "abundant literary and epigraphic witness to this ancient institution" should be used to analyze the New Testament setting. "Such an analysis, in turn, holds the promise of clarifying more precisely key features of the social contours

¹See Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 44-45; Pedrito Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 48-67.

²For example, James Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 102.

³John B. Polhill, "Prejudice, Partiality, and Faith: James 2," *Review and Expositor* 83 (1986): 395.

⁴Adamson, *Epistle of James*, 281.

⁵Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude*, AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 27.

and cultural scripts which shaped the world and literature of early Christianity.⁶

While the literature cited in this article indicates that ancient patronage has illuminated a number of other NT passages, an understanding of patron-client relations has not yet explicitly affected the interpretation of Jas 2:1-13. Following Elliott's lead, therefore, this article explores how an understanding of ancient patronage may contribute to the interpretation of Jas 2:1-13. In the first section, patronage as a social institution in the world of the NT is discussed. In the second, the passage itself is studied, with particular attention to the rich man in vv. 2-4, to examine the relevance of patronage for its interpretation.

Patronage: The Patron-Client Relation

The following survey of patronage in the NT world is not exhaustive. Its purpose is to provide sufficient background to re-evaluate our understanding of Jas 2:1-13.

Patronage Defined

According to Halvor Moxnes, "patron-client relations are social relations between individuals based on a strong element of inequality and difference in power." The basis of the relation is reciprocity—the mutual "exchange of different and very unequal resources."⁷ Services or favors are often exchanged: the patron provides money, a dinner, or security in court; the client composes a poem for the patron, renders homage, or otherwise enhances his or her status.⁸

In their seminal study on patronage, S. N. Eisenstadt and Louis Roniger also describe characteristics of the patronage relation. There is an uneven exchange of resources: support and protection from the patron; solidarity and loyalty from the client. In particular there is a "strong element of solidarity in these relations, linked to personal honor

⁶John H. Elliott, "Patronage and Clientism in Early Christian Society: A Short Reading Guide," *Forum* 3 (December 1987): 39.

⁷Halvor Moxnes, "Patron-Client Relations and the New Community in Luke-Acts," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 242. A. Blok sees the patron-client dynamic functioning in a variety of relations: father-son, God-man, saint-devotee, lord-vassal, landlord-tenant, politician-voter, among others ("Variations in Patronage," *Sociologische Gids* 16 [1969]: 365-378.

⁸Barbara K. Gold, *Literary Patronage in Greece and Rome* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 2.

and obligations." These relations are voluntary, yet binding and long-term.⁹

Patronage in the Greco-Roman World

Jo-Ann Shelton points out that the "patronage system was one of the most deep-rooted and pervasive aspects of ancient Roman society." Through these vertical relations the "upper class and lower class were bound to one another in relationships which emphasized deference and obsequiousness on the part of many toward a few." As a father had the duty of protecting his family, the aristocrats were to "devote time, energy, and money to the welfare of those inferior to them—the lower-class masses—and to provide public services without pay, but they demanded in return gratitude, submission, and veneration."¹⁰

One of the evidences of respect that patrons in Rome demanded of their clients was a daily appearance at the *salutatio*. While the patron benefited by appearing influential and powerful because of his many visitors, the client had an opportunity to receive favors or promises thereof. In one of his satires, Juvenal pointed out that at times "a meal is the return which your grand friendship yields you."¹¹ Martial describes in clever epigrams the feelings of clients. One is frustrated to attend the *salutatio* only to find his patron absent. Another jokingly suggests that the gold leaf supposedly from his patron's praetor crown is merely a flake from the leg of his patron's couch, "scraped off by the nail of a cunning slave."¹²

Patronage contributed to politics in Rome. In 64 B.C. Quintus Tullius Cicero wrote his more famous brother, Marcus Tullius Cicero, a letter on how to make the most of patronage as he ran for public office.

Make sure that both the large number of your friends and also their high ranks are quite apparent. . . . Take care that you retain these supporters by reminding them of your campaign, by asking for their votes, and by using every method to make sure that the people who owe you favors understand that there will never be another opportunity for them to return the favor, and that the people who

⁹S. N. Eisenstadt and Louis Roniger, *Patrons, Clients and Friends: Interpersonal Relations and the Structure of Trust in Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 48-49; see also S. N. Eisenstadt and Louis Roniger, "Patron-Client Relations as a Model of Structuring Social Exchange," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22 (1980): 49-51.

¹⁰Jo-Ann Shelton, *As the Romans Did* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 13, 14.

¹¹*Satire* 5.12-23.

¹²*Epigram* 2.32; 8.33.

desire your help understand that there will never be another opportunity for them to put you under obligation to them.

. . . Make sure that you are attended every day by men from each class, order, and age group. . . . Your attendants can also be divided into three groups: (1) those who come to your home for the morning salutation, (2) those who escort you from your home, and (3) those who follow you through the city.

Come down to the Forum at the same time every day; for a large crowd of escorts every day brings you great renown and great respect. . . .¹³

Seneca the Younger (ca. 4 B.C. - ca. A.D. 65) describes the foibles of both patrons and clients. The greedy clients, he notes, do not court "you for yourself; they merely court something from you."¹⁴ On the other hand, patrons torture their clients by making them wait and then, "asleep and sluggish from last night's debauch," can remember "the right name only after it has been whispered to them a thousand times."¹⁵ The hypocrisy of the institution is clear.

Moxnes describes different types of patrons. Some are able to provide for the clients from their own resources. On the other hand, the broker-patron serves as a mediator; he does not give of his own means, but facilitates the acquisition of goods or services by the client. A benefactor-patron, in turn, is able to provide major benefits to a community, for example, the construction of public buildings or monuments or payment for a public festival.¹⁶

Patronage operated throughout the Roman Empire on all levels. Everett Ferguson notes that "everyone from slave to aristocrat felt bound to display respect to someone more powerful than himself, up to the emperor."¹⁷ In Rome this social institution was especially well-developed, following specific social canons. Although patronage functioned in other parts of the Empire, specific information is scarce. Garnsey and Woolf surmise, however, that patronage functioned "in

¹³Quintus Tullius Cicero *Some Thoughts about Political Campaigns* 1.1-5; 8.29-31, 33; 9.34-38; 11.41-45; 12.48; 13.53; 14.54, 54, quoted in Shelton, 220-224.

¹⁴*Epistle* 19.4.

¹⁵*On the Shortness of Life* 14.4.

¹⁶Moxnes, "Patron-Client Relations," 248-249.

¹⁷Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 45.

widely separated parts of the Roman empire, operating alongside systems of rural dependency."¹⁸

Regarding patronage among Jews, Daniel Sperber notes that "the Rabbinic literature contains evidence of the spread of the phenomenon of patronage from about the mid-third century onwards." The rabbis described God as more willing to help than a patron.¹⁹ Sperber's time frame is later than the first-century setting of James, but one might conjecture that patronage was known earlier among the Jews.

Patronage in the New Testament

The New Testament provides no explicit discussion of patronage or the patron-client relation. However, recent studies suggest that patronage is evident in the text, as might be expected in a first-century Mediter-ranean environment.²⁰ Several aspects of the Luke-Acts narration may be related to patronage. Jerome H. Neyrey posits that "patron-client relations, then, are an indispensable scenario for understanding the full meaning of the social relations in Luke-Acts, especially those that deal with food and meals."²¹ In his book, *The Economy of the Kingdom*, Moxnes describes several aspects of the patron-client relation, then applies them to Palestine as Luke describes it in his Gospel.²² It is possible, according to Vernon K. Robbins, that Theophilus was a patron of Luke, from whom Luke would have

¹⁸Peter Garnsey and Greg Woolf, "Patronage of the Rural Poor in the Roman World," *Patronage in Ancient Society*, ed. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (London: Routledge, 1989), 166. See also Peter Garnsey and Richard P. Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 28-29, 122; Richard P. Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1982).

¹⁹*Y. Berachot* 9.1, as quoted in Daniel Sperber, "Patronage in Amoraic Palestine (c. 220-400): Causes and Effects," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 14 (1971): 234. The text reads: "A man who has a patron, if he has trouble, he does not barge in on him suddenly, but comes, stands outside at his gateway, and tells the servant, 'So and so (i.e. I) is standing at the gate of your court; perhaps you will permit him to enter'. Not so the Lord. If trouble comes upon a man, he does not have to cry to Michael or Gabriel (God's servants, the Angels), but straight to Me, and I will answer him immediately."

²⁰For example, Bruce J. Malina, "Patron and Client: The Analogy behind Synoptic Theology," *Forum* 4 (March 1988): 2-32.

²¹Jerome H. Neyrey, "Ceremonies in Luke-Acts," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 374.

²²Halvor Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), especially 36-47 and 62-64.

received sustenance while doing his writing; he repaid Theophilus by dedicating the book to him.²³

The story of the healing of the centurion's servant (Luke 7:2-10) suggests the brokerage of patron-client relations.²⁴ The Jewish elders came to Jesus requesting that he should heal the centurion's servant, because he "loves our nation, and he built us our synagogue" (v. 5).

Bruce Malina goes further in his interpretation of patronage in the New Testament. He sees Jesus as the broker between God the heavenly patron and the clientele he gathers during his ministry.²⁵

Some commentators have caught glimpses of patronage in the epistles. Prominent Christians may have been benefactors of their local churches. Ferguson sees Phoebe (called *διάκονος* and *προστάτις*, Rom 16:2) as a "patroness," one "who gives aid and who had the resources to do so."²⁶ In his commentary on James 2, Peter H. Davids implies a potential patron-client relation between church members and the gold-ringed man in splendid clothes when he says: "If a wealthy person entered the church or was a member, there would be every reason to court him. His money was seen as a means of survival. Certainly one should not offend *him*."²⁷ Leaders of house churches in the early Christian church might well have been patrons or benefactors: among them, Lydia (Acts 16:14-15), Aquila and Priscilla (Rom 16:4-5; 1 Cor 16:19), and Stephanas (1 Cor 16:15).²⁸

In a 1992 study on patronage in the church of Corinth, John Chow concludes that "patronage was *one* of the important ways through which relationships in first-century Corinth were structured." When the problems in the Corinthian church are viewed in "light of the convention of patronage in Roman Corinth," some important aspects of these problems can be attributed "to the presence, influence and activity of some who functioned as patrons of the church."²⁹ The divisions at the Lord's table (1 Cor 11), Chow feels, "probably reflect some of the same distinctions between patrons and inferiors." If the

²³Vernon K. Robbins, "The Social Location of the Implied Author," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 321-322.

²⁴Moxnes, "Patron-Client Relations," 241-242.

²⁵Malina, "Patron and Client," 2, 11, 13.

²⁶Ferguson, 45.

²⁷Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 33.

²⁸Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 78, 98, 119.

²⁹John K. Chow, *Patronage and Power* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 188.

immoral man were a patron, the church might have been proud of him—in spite of his lapse. Further, the difficulty in giving up eating at the idol temple might have been due to an unwillingness to break off connections with powerful patrons in Corinth.³⁰ Chow suggests that “Paul’s directives [to the church in Corinth] were aimed at strengthening the horizontal relationships in the church and these directives, in effect, carried subversive implication for vertical patron-client ties in the church.”³¹ Although Chow’s conclusions may go beyond what the evidence warrants, some indications of patronage in the Corinthian church are evident.

The Benefactor Patron

The concept of patron-client relations between individuals can be extended to group relations. Whereas the patron provides advantages to an individual, the benefactor grants benefits to a community or even a nation. Frederick Danker has collected 53 examples of the recognition of benefactors, mostly from the Graeco-Roman world in which the New Testament appeared. The inscriptions and documents provide what Danker calls a “profile” of the human or divine benefactors: they are virtuous, generous, and reliable. Benefactors confer benefits which include forgiveness, healing, and financial aid. The natural response to benefactors is public honor and gratitude.³²

Examples of honorific decrees illustrate the role of the benefactor and the response of the community. From Julia Gordos in Asia comes a grave inscription from the year 75/76 A.D.; Theophilus is honored with a public reading of commendation, and an inscription for “having contributed all good-will towards his country, having lived his life as master of his family, providing many things for his country through his generalship and tenure as agoranomos and his embassies as far as Rome and Germany and Caesar.”³³ An honorific decree from Mysia (mid-first century A.D.) extolls the virtues of Apollonis. She was honored by the whole city “because of her parents’ virtue and that of her husband, and because of her own moderation.”³⁴ On a marble stele found in Benghazi, Decimus Valerius Dionysios is honored by the Jews of the city for

³⁰Ibid., 189.

³¹Ibid., 190.

³²Frederick W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis, MO: Clayton, 1982).

³³G. H. R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (North Ryde, NSW, Australia: Macquarie University, 1981-1989), 2:58-60.

³⁴Horsley, 4:10-17.

plastering the floor of the amphitheater and adorning its walls with paintings. He is to be exempt from "liturgies," crowned with an "olive crown," and named "at the new moon."³⁵

In Judaism the support of the synagogue was a most common and appreciated way of contributing to the community. An example appears in Luke 7, where the Jewish elders urged Jesus to heal the centurion's servant because he had built them a synagogue (v. 5). Synagogue inscriptions recovered by archeology amply illustrate this kind of benefaction.

Baruch Lifshitz has compiled 102 examples of inscriptions relating to support for construction, maintenance, or reconstruction of Jewish synagogues. These come from as far apart as Syria-Palestine and Spain; they range over several centuries. Some record the donation of the whole synagogue structure, as in Lifshitz' first inscription from Greece: "I have built the synagogue from its foundations."³⁶ Others tell of those who contributed an altar,³⁷ a fountain,³⁸ or so many feet of pavement.³⁹

Most of these synagogue benefactors appear to have been Jewish, even when they bear Latin names, which indicate their accommodation to the environment.⁴⁰ On the other hand, some inscriptions suggest non-Jewish benefactors. For example, Julia Severa aided in the reconstruction of a synagogue in Phrygia; the same lady appears in another inscription as a pagan priestess.⁴¹ Paul Trebilco concludes that she was "a pagan who was favourably disposed towards the Jews and built a synagogue as their patroness."⁴²

The "benefactor" was a person who undertook some activity in favor of a group, often the construction of a building. In turn, he or she received the grateful homage of the community.

The Interpretation of James 2:1-13

In interpreting Jas 2:1-13 in the light of ancient patronage, I have made several assumptions. The first is that Christian congregations

³⁵Horsley, 4:202-209.

³⁶Baruch Lifshitz, *Donateurs et fondateurs dans les synagogues juives* (Paris: Gabalda, 1967), 13.

³⁷Ibid., 21.

³⁸Ibid., 38.

³⁹Ibid., 42-45.

⁴⁰A Jewish woman of Rome even bore the name Isidora, "gift of Isis" (Jean Baptiste Frey, CIJ, vol. 1, *Europe* [New York: KTAV, 1975], lxviii).

⁴¹Lifshitz, 34-36.

⁴²Paul R. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 59.

might have had patrons or, more probably, benefactors. Patronage language appears repeatedly in James.⁴³ However, it most obviously points to God as the authentic Patron of Christians, especially in chapter 1, where James points to the "giving God" who is ready to provide whatever one may lack (vv. 4, 5). Vv. 6-8 indicate that one must ask in the right way—with full faith. Those who have God for a patron, even though they may suffer trials, will eventually receive a crown of life (1:12), not merely a golden leaf from a praetor's crown as might a Roman client. Perfect gifts do not come from earthly patrons; they come down from the Father above, the Patron who does not change his mind according to the day's mood (1:17). In earthly patronage, patrons who had their own clients often had a patron themselves. Thus, if Christians are clients of God, they are also patrons of the less fortunate, the widows and orphans of 1:27.

A second set of assumptions has to do with the epistle itself. While it cannot be determined with total certainty that James the early leader of the Christian churches in Jerusalem wrote the epistle, evidence and tradition strongly suggest the possibility.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the epistle seems to reflect the situation of the cosmopolitan Jerusalem church as depicted in Acts. In addition I believe the book is a literary epistle addressed to a group of believers, and is a unified treatise on issues they were facing.⁴⁵ Its theme is perhaps best expressed by Edmond Hiebert, who affirms that: "*Tests of living faith* is indeed the unifying theme of the epistle and . . . provides ready access to its contents."⁴⁶ In his letter James deals with how Christians ought to live their faith under differing circumstances.

⁴³I owe much of the data in this paragraph to the reactions of Jerome H. Neyrey to my presentation on patronage in James 2 at the Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity Seminar, Notre Dame University, 17 March 1993.

⁴⁴Davids, *James*, 9; Ralph Martin, *James*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), xxi-lxi; Adamson, *Epistle of James*, 22.

⁴⁵F. O. Francis, "The Form and Function of the Opening and Closing Paragraphs of James and 1 John," *ZNW* 61(1970): 110-126. This, despite Martin Dibelius, who emphasized the discontinuity and "lack of theology" of James because "paranaesis provides no opportunity for the development and elaboration of religious ideas" (*James*, rev. Heinrich Greeven, trans. Michael A. Williams, Hermeneia [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976], 5, 21.

⁴⁶D. Edmond Hiebert, "The Unifying Theme of James." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 (July-September 1978): 224. A. S. Geyser suggests the key to the unity of James is to be found in a "reconstruction (from internal evidence) of the social and religious condition of the addressees." Thus the "seemingly haphazard and unconnected string of moralizing proverbs and trite sermonettes may shape into a consistent picture" (A. S. Geyser, "The Letter of James and the Social Condition of His Addressees," *Neotestamentica* 9 (1975): 25-33).

If indeed the theme of the epistle is “*tests of living faith*,” Jas 2:1-13 speaks of the test posed to faith by *προσωπολημψία*, “favoritism.” One might even suggest that the kind of favoritism that here tested the believers’ faith was that routinely shown in the practice of patronage.

An analysis of the flow of the passage suggests several sections:

- 1 Prohibition: Do not mix favoritism and the Christian faith
- 2-4 Illustration: Favoritism in the congregation and its condemnation
- 5-7 Explanation: Why favoritism makes no sense
- 8-9 Expansion of the prohibition: Sinful favoritism is not compatible with loving one’s neighbor as fulfillment of the law
- 10-11 Caution: Favoritism is much a sin as adultery or murder
- 12-13 Warning: Judgment by the law of liberty is sure

This article does not propose to present an exegetical study of the whole passage. It only looks at the those verses where the interpretation of the passage might be affected by a better understanding of the ancient social convention of patronage.

The Prohibition

In Jas 2:1, the Christian congregation is forbidden to mix acts of *προσωπολημψία* with their faith in Jesus. The prohibition is stated in the present tense: the recipients of the letter are to stop committing these acts.

The word *προσωπολημψία*, from *πρόσωπον λαμβάνειν*, is unique to the New Testament and was probably unintelligible to non-Jews or Christians of Gentile background. The phrase is modeled on the Hebrew, *ns’panîm*, “lift faces,” reflecting the custom in which the one greeted by a respectful, face-down person, lifted that face in sign of recognition and favor. “Partiality” and “favoritism” are appropriate translations of *προσωπολημψία*. One might translate the verb, as does the TEV, to “treat people in different ways because of their outward appearance.”⁴⁷

This prohibition echoes Lev 19:15: “You should not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great” (cf. Deut 1:17; Exod 23:2-3).⁴⁸ As does

⁴⁷See Eduard Lohse, “*προσωπολημψία*,” *TDNT*, 6:779-780. Jouette Bassler surveys divine impartiality in the OT, deuterocanonical and rabbinic literature, Philo, and Paul; the description of God’s impartiality explicates what is expected of humans in this area (*Divine Impartiality* [Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982]).

⁴⁸On Lev 19:15, Kenneth G. Phifer states: “It is instructive to note that this Leviticus passage cuts both ways. The poor shall not be favored nor the rich treated with subservience. James’s words also imply a call to equitable treatment regardless of outward appearance” (“James 2:1-5,” *Interpretation* 37 [July 1982]: 278).

the Torah, the New Testament views *προσωπολημψία* in a negative light: Jesus does not do it (Mt 22:16; Mk 12:14; Luke 20:21); nor does God (Acts 10:34; Rom 1:11; Gal 2:6). Jas 2:9 calls *προσωπολημψία* sin.

The Illustration

As a “flagrant demonstration of partiality,”⁴⁹ James 2:2-3 describes the reaction of a Christian congregation to the entrance of a splendidly dressed gentleman and a filthy pauper. The condition is given as third-class, potential—something that could happen. This is not necessarily a story of something that had happened; one would assume, however, that, to be effective, the example was related to the experience of the believers receiving the epistle.⁵⁰

εἰς συναγωγὴν ὑμῶν. Here the “synagogue” is a Christian congregation or meeting place, belonging to the brothers addressed in v. 1. Although some scholars would contest this notion, NT and patristic usage of the term point to the normal meaning of “synagogue” as a meeting place, in this case for Christians.⁵¹

Ἄνθρωπος χρυσοδακτύλιος ἐν ἐσθῆτι λαμπρᾷ. The man is not called rich. However, his appearance—the gold rings and splendid clothes—shows he has means and social status; he is relatively “richer” than others in the synagogue. His demeanor demands respect and honor.⁵²

The word *χρυσοδακτύλιος* is unique and is considered by some to have been coined by James.⁵³ The meaning, however, is clear: the man wore gold on his finger (or fingers). Garnsey and Saller point out that the wearing of a gold ring was an entitlement of equestrians;⁵⁴ thus, our man would have been of noble class. On the other hand, Juvenal speaks of a slave-born citizen of Egypt who “airs a summer ring of gold on his

⁴⁹Cain H. Felder, “Partiality and God’s Law: An Exegesis of James 2:1-13,” *JRT* 39 (Fall-Winter 1982-83): 53.

⁵⁰Roy Bowen Ward, “Partiality in the Assembly,” *HTR* 62:1969:88.

⁵¹Some scholars suggest that *συναγωγή* here refers to a court scene (for example, Martin, 57-58, 61; Maynard-Reid, 56-58). For patristic writings using *συναγωγή* to refer to Christian gatherings, see Ignatius *To Polycarp* 4.2; *Hermas Mandate* 9, 11, 13, 14; see also Smit, 64.

⁵²On the question of honor, closely related to patronage, see Jerome H. Neyrey, “Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts,” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 25-65. On the honor claimed by the display of wealth, see Jerome H. Neyrey, “Poverty and Loss of Honor in Matthew’s Beatitudes,” paper presented at the CJA Seminar, Notre Dame University, October 1992, 4-7.

⁵³Adamson, *Epistle of James*, 106.

⁵⁴Garnsey and Saller, 116. On the use of gold rings by Roman men, see Epictetus *Discourse* 1.22.18; Pliny *Natural History* 33.12.

sweating finger” and Epictetus describes the wearing of rings as one of the “ways whereby an indignity may be done to manliness.”⁵⁵ By the first century A.D. earlier restrictions on the use of gold had eased. More than one ring began to be worn, often as a mark of dignity, but also as an ornament or a personal seal.⁵⁶ In Luke 15:22, the father places a ring on the prodigal’s finger as a sign of acceptance and honor. The use of rings appears as normal in the Mishnah—signet rings for men and plain ones for women.⁵⁷ The gold ring (or rings) would show the gentlemen to be somewhat affluent, not necessarily a truly wealthy man or a noble Roman.

The basic meaning of λαμπρός is “brightly shining.” Reicke has conjectured that the splendid clothing refers to the *toga candida* worn by a magistrate; thus the individual might have been seeking electoral support from the Christian congregation.⁵⁸ The meaning of λαμπρός differs according to the word it describes. The term appears eleven times in the New Testament, with six referring specifically to clothing: the mocking “gorgeous robe” Herod’s soldiers put on Jesus before sending him to Pilate (Luke 23:11); the “shining garments” of the heavenly messenger sent to Cornelius (Acts 10:30); the two occurrences in Jas 2; and two references to “bright” linen clothing in Rev 15:6 and 19:8. Philo gives λαμπρός as an antonym of ῥυπαρός, even as James does here.⁵⁹

James here describes the man as conspicuously well-dressed. His garb, like the ring, shows that he has means and status—or at least that he wishes to have people believe so.

The gold-fingered man in shiny clothes has been identified by some as an outsider to the Christian congregation. Perhaps he was a politician seeking election, says Reicke, who points out that “the magnates of the Roman empire were interested in acquiring the political support of different organizations by generosity towards their members.”⁶⁰ Ropes says this man would not be a Christian, but perhaps might “worship the same God.”⁶¹ For Dibelius this person was not a Christian, or at

⁵⁵Juvenal *Satire* 1.25-30 and Seneca *Natural Questions* 7.31.

⁵⁶R. A. Higgins, *Greek and Roman Jewelry* (London: Methuen, 1961), 189.

⁵⁷Mishnah *Kelim* 13:6; 11:8; *Shabbath* 6:1-3.

⁵⁸Reicke, 27.

⁵⁹Philo *On Joseph*, 105.

⁶⁰Reicke, 27.

⁶¹James Hardy Ropes, *The Epistle of St. James*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1973), 197.

least no longer properly included in the Christian church.⁶² Laws stresses his equestrian rank.⁶³ In her passionate defense of the poor and indictment of the rich, Elsa Tamez finds that none of the rich in James belong to the Christian community, "or at least the author does not think they should belong to it."⁶⁴

On the other hand, that a rich man might be a member of a Christian congregation should not be surprising. The book of Acts clearly shows that relatively well-to-do Christians belonged to the Jerusalem congregation: Barnabas (4:36), Ananias and Sapphira (5:1), and Mary (12:12-14) owned property. The Christians in Antioch (11:28-30), as well as those in Asia and Greece (Rom 15:26; 1 Cor 16:1; Acts 24:17), were able to provide relief to their brothers and sisters in Judea. The *Shepherd of Hermas* undoubtedly presupposes the presence of wealthy people in the church.⁶⁵ Meeks points out that Deissmann is to blame for the erroneous idea that first-century Christians were mostly from the lower classes; to the contrary, he gives prosopographic evidence of the large number of persons from higher social classes.⁶⁶ From a different perspective, Ralph Martin finds that "how to treat pagans would hardly cause division," thus suggesting that the man was a Christian.⁶⁷

However, Maynard-Reid is probably right in stating that "the issue of whether the rich person is a Christian or not has no relevancy in this context."⁶⁸ According to Felder, although the rich man and the poor are the actors, James' topic is the "fraudulent criteria of the assembly's judgments and 'acts of partiality'."⁶⁹ The theme here is the incompatibility of faith and partiality—a favoritism such as that entrenched in the patronage system.

Δὲ καὶ πτωχὸς ἐν ῥυπαρόῃ ἐσθῆτι. In the LXX and other Greek literature, a difference is made between πέννης and πτωχός. The first means poor; the second, destitute. The New Testament uses the first only once (2 Cor 9:9), in a quotation of the LXX of Ps 112:9. Whether the exclusive use of πτωχός signifies that all the poor of the New

⁶²Dibelius, 87, 88.

⁶³Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 98.

⁶⁴Tamez, 31.

⁶⁵*Simile* 1.8-11; 2.5-7.

⁶⁶Meeks, 51-73.

⁶⁷Martin, 61-62; see also Laws, 99, 100; Davids, 46.

⁶⁸Maynard-Reid, 44.

⁶⁹Felder, 56.

Testament were totally destitute, one must doubt.⁷⁰ The word *πτωχός* appears 34 times, of which 23 describe a person (or persons) lacking what is needed to live decently.⁷¹

Four words from the same root as *ῥυπαρός* appear in the New Testament. Their common idea is that of filth. The poor man's clothes are not merely shabby, they are filthy—quite understandable if he has only one very old garment.

In Jas 2, the poor man is defined by the description of his clothes, in stark contrast to the shiny garments of the gold-fingered rich man. He is very, very poor, a pauper, perhaps a social outcast, possibly a beggar, with no honor due him, with nothing to offer to the congregation.

Σὺ κάθου ὡδε καλῶς . . . Σὺ κάθου ὑπὸ τὸ ὑποπόδιόν μου. The instruction to the rich man, to sit well, may mean either, "You sit here fitly, appropriately, in the right way, splendidly," or "Please sit here" (RSV). In any case the words put in the mouth of the usher show that the man in shiny clothes is offered preferential treatment along with the seat.

The poor man, on the other hand, is told—rather abruptly—to stand or sit "under my footstool." Again, words are put in the usher's mouth, but his attitude represents that of the congregation. Perhaps sitting "under" the footstool is an exaggeration as are the caricatures of the persons involved in the story. Adamson suggests that the *ὑποπόδιον* is actually the Latin *podium*.⁷² In any case, the filthy pauper is relegated to the place of the honorless, the worthless.

In the Jewish context of the first century, sitting in special places brought honor. Preferential seating arrangements in the Jewish synagogue are alluded to in Luke 11:43; these are called "chief seats in the synagogues" in Matt 23:6 and Luke 20:46. Luke 14:7 tells how Jesus observed the Pharisees "picking out the places of honor at the table"; he immediately related a parable about a wedding feast, where someone occupied the place of honor, only to be moved "in disgrace . . . to occupy the last place" (vv. 8-9). His advice was to take the last place and wait for the host to say, "Friend, move up higher"; "then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you" (v. 10).⁷³

⁷⁰See Tamez, 24.

⁷¹On *πτωχός*, see Ernst Bammel, "Πτωχός," *TDNT*, 6:885-915.

⁷²James Adamson, *James: The Man and His Message* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 278.

⁷³On the significance of seating arrangements at meals, see Jerome H. Neyrey, "Ceremonies in Luke-Acts," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 364-366.

In the Roman world, seating arrangements showed status and were carefully observed. In Spain, detailed regulations existed for seating in the amphitheater and theater; fines were imposed on those who inappropriately sat in "better" seats.⁷⁴ Suetonius and Tacitus describe how specific seats or rows of seats were designated for different kinds of people; senators, soldiers, civilians, singles—all had a clearly determined place to sit in public spectacles.⁷⁵ Two honorific decrees from Tarentum (fourth century A.D.) mandate that the benefactors should "receive front seating at the contests" as a sign of the city's recognition of their benefits.⁷⁶ Seating at banquets and dinner—and sometimes the quality of the food and drink offered—was arranged for the "display of distinction of status."⁷⁷ Regarding the importance attributed to particular seating arrangements, Garnsey and Saller contend that, "putting everyone in his proper place was a visual affirmation of the dominance of the imperial social structure, and one calculated to impress the bulk of the population of the empire."⁷⁸

Admittedly the *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* do not reflect church practice in the first century. However, it is interesting to note the fourth-century instructions to deacons and deaconesses in charge of church seating. When visitors came from another parish, the deacon was to question them regarding their status and then "conduct everyone to the place proper for him." After briefly describing the place for different kinds of people, the *Constitutions* continue: "Let the deacon be the disposer of the places, that every one of those that comes in may go to his proper place, and may not sit at the entrance." The final portion of the instructions regarding church suggests circumstances similar to those in James' church.

But if after the congregation is sat down, any other person comes upon you of good fashion and character in the world, whether he be a stranger, or one of your own country, . . . let the brethren receive him by the deacons; and if there be not a place, let the deacon by speaking, but not in anger, raise the junior, and place the stranger there. And it is but reasonable that one that loves the

⁷⁴Garnsey and Saller, 117.

⁷⁵Suetonius *Augustus* 44; *Claudius* 21; Tacitus *Annals* 15.32; Garnsey and Saller, 117.

⁷⁶Danker, 65.

⁷⁷Garnsey and Saller, 122. Stambaugh and Balch suggest that the partiality described in the Corinthian agape feast (1 Cor 11:21) might have resembled the pattern set by secular banquets, often given by patrons (John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment*, ed. Wayne A. Meeks [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986], 114.

⁷⁸Stambaugh and Balch, 117.

brethren should do so of his own accord; but if he refuse, let him raise him up by force, and set him behind all, that the rest may be taught to give place to those that are more honourable. Nay, if a poor man, or one of a mean family, or a stranger, comes upon you, whether he be old or young, and there be no place, the deacon shall find a place for even these, and that with all his heart; that instead of accepting persons before men, his ministration towards God may be well-pleasing. The very same thing let the deaconess do to these women, whether poor or rich, that come unto them.⁷⁹

James' vignette to illustrate partiality or favoritism presents, then, two men coming into the assembly. One is obviously well-to-do; his gold rings and splendid robe display not only his ability to provide well for himself, but also his claim to honor. The other is extremely poor and dirty. The first is able to provide benefits for the congregation; he may already be a benefactor of the congregation; the second has nothing to offer. For the first—as would be expected for persons commanding the respect of the community—there is a special place. For the second, there is a corner on the floor, at the feet of the usher. For the possible patron, there is deference, for the outcast, nothing. The decision on how to treat these two—according to their appearance—is condemned by James as one made by “judges with evil thoughts” (v. 4).

The Explanation

In vv. 5-7 James points out the absurdity of currying the favor of a rich person or patron. He gives three reasons. Snobbery—particularly the kind so common in patronage—is absurd in view of the fact that (a) God has chosen the poor for his special purpose; (b) the rich do not deserve honor since they are oppressive, even dragging people to court; and (c) their conduct is a blasphemy to the name Christian invoked over the believers.⁸⁰

ὁ θεὸς ἐξελέξατο τοὺς πτωχοὺς. The terminology of “choosing” was familiar to Jewish thinking. God chose Abraham (Gen 18:19) and Israel (Deut 4:37; 7:7; 10:15; 14:2). In fact God had chosen a people “for his own inheritance” (Ps 33: 12); his “chosen ones” would inherit the mountains of Judah (Isa 65:9). Jesus, as recorded in the NT gospels, repeatedly spoke about the chosen ones (Matt 22:14; Mk 13:20; Luke

⁷⁹*Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* 2.7.47-58, ANF 7:421-422. “If any be found standing in places not their own, let the Deacons put them to shame and bring them back to their places. . . . Let the people also, when they meet in the church, be placed together according to their class” (*Ethiopic Didascalia* [London: Oriental Translation Fund, 1834], 94-95).

⁸⁰D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistle of James* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 156.

18:7; John 15:16). Christians also knew themselves to be chosen (Eph 1:4; 1 Pet 2:9).

The concept of God's "choosing the poor" may have originated from the sayings traditions of Jesus. According to Matthew and Luke, Jesus understood it to be his mission to bring good news to the poor (Matt 11:5; Luke 4:18; 7:22; cf. Matt 5:3; Luke 6:20).⁸¹

οἱ πλούσιοι καταδυναστεύουσιν ὑμῶν καὶ αὐτοὶ ἔλκουσιν ὑμᾶς εἰς κριτήρια. Rich people who claim honor from the congregation, such as would a benefactor—and evidently the beringed man in shiny clothes—are not deserving of respect because their conduct is not respectable.⁸² They are not the only defective Christians in the congregation; there are those whose tongues offend (Jas 3:5-6), some who allow jealousy and strife in their hearts (3:14-15), some who are boastful (4:13-17), and others who fail to pay just wages (5:1-6). These oppress their brethren.

The verb *καταδυναστεύω* is used twice in the New Testament: once in Acts 10:38 of the overpowering of the devil and here in James. Its meaning is "to oppress, exploit, dominate."⁸³ In the LXX, the verb is used of socioeconomic oppression (among others: Deut 24:7; Jer 7:6; Ezek 18:7; Amos 4:1; 8:4), especially of the oppression of the poor, widows and orphans: "And do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor" (Zech 7:10).⁸⁴

αὐτοὶ βλασφημοῦσιν τὸ καλὸν ὄνομα. The conduct of the rich constitutes blasphemy of the "good name" by which the Christians are called.⁸⁵ In the New Testament, words from the root *βλασφημία* all

⁸¹On the relation between James and Matthew, see Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., "The Epistle of James and the Gospel of Matthew," *JBL* 75 (March 1956):40-51; Davids, 48. Patrick J. Hartin finds 34 correspondences between James and the synoptic tradition; most occur in the Matthean Sermon on the Mount (*James and the Q Sayings of Jesus* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), 141-145.

⁸²Although the rich man may be an outsider (so, Laws, 99-100; Reicke, 27; Hiebert, 161), I prefer to consider him an insider, a friend if not a member (see Adamson, *Epistle of James*, 102; id., *James*, 251; Ward, 95-97; Martin Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church: Aspects of a Social History of Early Christianity* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974], 47).

⁸³So BAG; the word is not discussed in *TDNT*.

⁸⁴The *Epistle to Diognetus* 10.5 warns: "To be happy does not, indeed, consist in lording it (*καταδυναστεύω*) over one's neighbors, or in longing to have some advantage over the weaker ones, or in being rich and ordering one's inferiors about" (*Library of Christian Classics* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953], 1:221). Origen of Alexandria urges the Christian duty of helping the *καταδυναστευομένοις πτωχοῖς* (*Enarrationes in Job* 6, PG 17, col. 93). Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 329-390) warns against accumulating fields and houses, while oppressing the poor (*In Sanctum Pascha, Oratio* 45, PG 36, col 648).

⁸⁵Felder, 59.

carry the basic concept of violating the power and majesty of God. For Christians, blasphemy in this sense included Christ. Denial of Christ or causing someone to speak ill of Christ or the Christian way also constituted blasphemy. "Any bad or unloving action can contain it [blasphemy], either because it resists the holy will of God or because it causes the enemies of Christianity to calumniate it (1 Tm. 6:1; Jm. 2:7; R. 2:24; Tt. 2:5)."⁸⁶ Martin translates the phrase: "bring into disgrace the fine name by which you are called."⁸⁷ Laws agrees that the "unloving litigiousness" of the rich brings "into disrepute among outsiders" the Christian name they bear.⁸⁸ This use of *βλασφημῆω* is illustrated in 2 Pet 2:2, where because of false teachers among the Christians, *ἡ ὁδὸς τῆς ἀληθείας βλασφημηθήσεται*.

The three rhetorical questions—which must be answered in the affirmative—constitute an indictment, not only of the rich, but of those who cater to the rich expecting to obtain favors.⁸⁹ James' Christians, says Smit, are "overly friendly towards the rich—and at the same time insulting and without care or sensitivity towards the poor." Their conduct shows

that they have learnt, like all people, that it is wise and clever conduct to favor the rich and powerful, since they can perhaps award you something, while you can hardly expect anything from the poor, from orphans, widows, marginalized. They do not act out of neighbourly love, fulfilling God's will, but 'they treat people in different ways according to their outward appearance,' and thereby they 'commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.'⁹⁰

In the final verses of the segment on partiality, James gives the theological implications of his presentation on favoritism. He points out that the favoritism they practice, as illustrated in their obsequious treatment of the one who could provide benefits to them as individuals or a congregation, is incompatible with loving one's neighbor as the fulfillment of the law (vv. 8-9). In fact, favoritism is as much a sin as adultery or murder (vv. 10-11). Finally, Christians are warned that they will surely be judged—and condemned—by the law of liberty for their dishonest conduct (vv. 12-13).

⁸⁶Hermann Wolfgang Beyer, "βλασφημία," *TDNT*, 1:621-625.

⁸⁷Martin, 66.

⁸⁸Laws, 107.

⁸⁹Ropes, 195; Felder, 59.

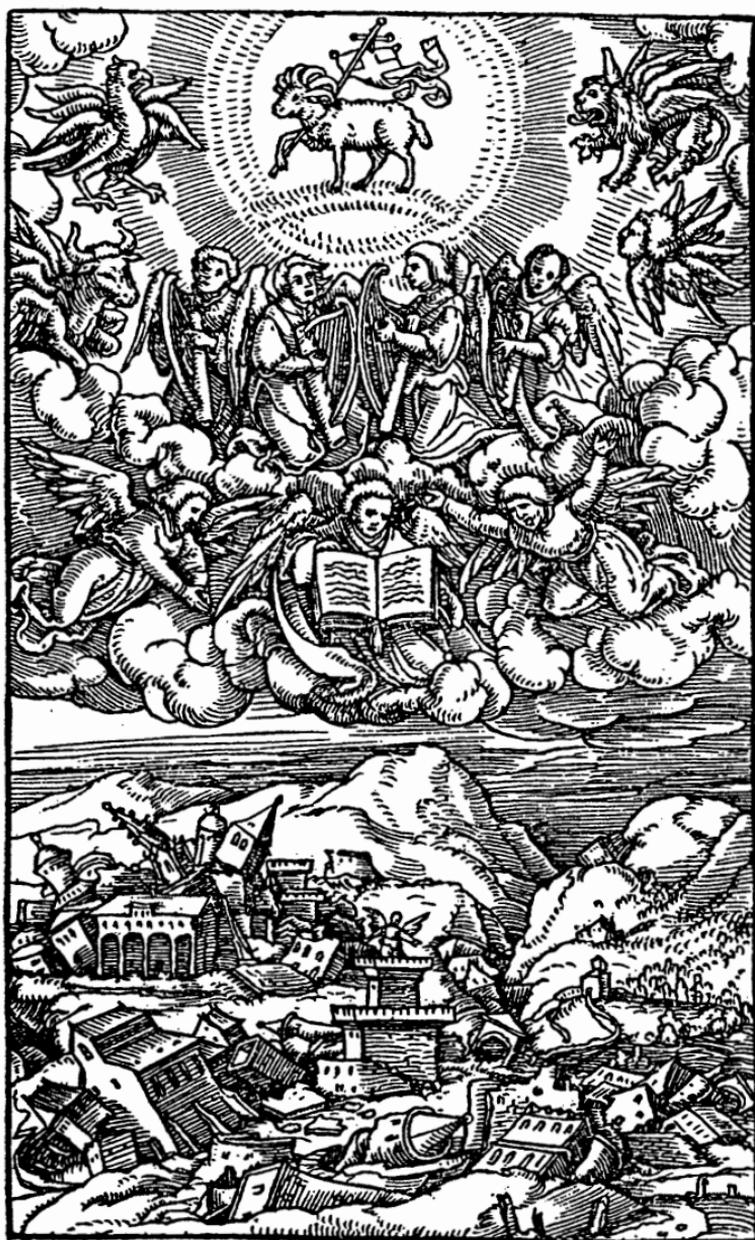
⁹⁰Smit, 63.

Conclusion

In the light of the ancient patronage system described in the first part of this article, Jas 2:1-13 takes on new contours. If patronage lies in the background of this passage, James is not so much condemning the rich and pronouncing himself in favor of the poor as he is advocating Christian respect for all, regardless of means or position. The congregation to which the epistle is addressed is admonished to practice God's impartiality. They are to eliminate the obsequious treatment of the beringed man in splendid clothes, even if by currying his favor they may obtain benefits for their congregation. At the same time, they should give to the pauper loving and considerate attention, in spite of the fact that he has nothing to offer the community. Equal respect for all would undercut the dishonest social relations that support patronage.

If James is offering a critique of the effects of ancient patronage on the congregations he is writing to, the use of this passage to support the condemnation of the rich and support for the poor is not justified. Instead, the thrust of the message is directed, as is the rest of the epistle, to the attitudes of the people in the congregation itself. They are to cease considering what people can do for them before deciding how to treat them. They are to apply their Christian faith to the test of favoritism and show the world that the Christian community applies its faith by treating everyone with respect.

The passage also indicates that the great reversal does not wait until the judgment day. Even now the man in splendid clothes must not assume that the congregation owes him special favor; he should not think of himself more highly than he ought (Rom 12:3). Likewise, the pauper is to know himself a citizen of God's kingdom (Luke 6:20).



The Lamb on Mount Zion, the 144,000, and the Three Angels. A woodcut by Hans Holbein. Taken from Strand, *Woodcuts to the Apocalypse from the Early Sixteenth Century*.