

The Ruach and the Humble in James and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Thoughts in Preparation for the Day of Atonement

Rob Vanhoff
TorahResource Institute • 2012

“Humble” in Hebrew and Greek

The primary passages from the Torah for our understanding of *Yom HaKippurim* are from Leviticus, chapters 16 and 23. The command to “afflict the soul” is given in both, and the Hebrew construction of each occurrence is the same.

וּעִנִּיתֶם אֶת נַפְשֵׁיכֶם - “*And you (pl.) shall humble your souls.*” (NASB)

The ancient Greek translation (3rd Century, BCE) follows this with precision:

ταπεινώσετε τὰς ψυχὰς ὑμῶν

An important connection is made for us here, which has ramifications on our understanding of passages in the Apostolic Writings that touch on humility. The LXX links the Hebrew verb *ענ* with the Greek verb *ταπεινώω*. In James 4:10, we see a phrase that very well may echo the Leviticus command:

“Humble yourselves (from ταπεινώω) in the presence of the Lord and He will exalt you.”

Earlier in this same passage (4:6), James quotes Proverbs 3:34, according to the LXX: “*God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.*” The word “humble” here is from the noun *ταπεινός* (the noun form of the verb we encounter in v. 10), which is the Septuagint’s translation of the Hebrew noun *עני*, meaning “poor, afflicted.” Thus twice in this chapter James employs a Greek word which in both cases communicates the Hebrew concept of “humble” or “afflict,” from the root *ענ*.

Now that we’ve established these connections, I want to zero in on an especially difficult verse in James 4. Look up verse 5 in your various English translations and you’ll see what I mean.

Contrast, for example, the NIV with the ESV:

“the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely” (NIV)

“He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us” (ESV)

The Greek reads, *πρὸς φθόνον ἐπιποθεῖ τὸ πνεῦμα ὃ κατώκισεν ἐν ἡμῖν*

The ESV assumes that James is quoting a source unknown to us, while the NIV assumes that he is merely alluding to a more general scriptural teaching. Whether this is a direct quote or allusion I will not address here, though there is no known ancient Hebrew or Greek text that looks quite like this one. Suffice it to say that I lean toward reading this as an allusion rather than a citation. But there is perhaps an even more important issue at hand. In the NIV translation, the “spirit” is that which produces envy in man (i.e., not the Holy Spirit). Contrary to this interpretation, the ESV assumes that the “spirit” here is indeed God’s. In the first instance, “envy” is a “bad fruit” that comes from fallen man’s inclination to evil, while in the second it describes God’s “good and godly” zeal for His people. Which translation should I follow?

Neither! Going against the grain of virtually all English translations, I believe the correct reading would be something like, “*the spirit that He caused to dwell in us yearns against envy.*”¹

1. Richard Bauckham argues for a similar reading, but arrives by a completely different route. See Chapter 21 of *The Holy Spirit and Christian Origins: Essays in Honor of James D. G. Dunn*, ed. Graham N. Stanton, et al, (2004 Eerdmans) pp. 270-281.

In other words, James is affirming that God put His Spirit into the believer, and that this Spirit is contrary to the things of the world listed in 3:13-4:4; the “envy/jealousy” of the NIV/ESV (Greek: φθόνος, *phthonos*) belongs on this list.

There are a few assumptions that I bring to my reading here. First, that “the spirit which He caused to dwell in us” is to be taken in parallel with James’ references to gifts and wisdom “from above” (1:17; 3:15,17) and the “engrafted word” (1:21) by which God has brought us forth (1:18). The second is a bit more technical; I take the *πρός* + accusative construction (*πρός φθόνον*) at the beginning of the phrase as meaning “against (envy).”² What follows is a brief outline of my third assumption, which reads the Greek verb *ἐπιποθέει* (ESV, “yearns”) in line with an interpretive trajectory that to my knowledge has remained unexplored by scholars.

The Semantic Range of ἐπιποθέω “to yearn”

This same verb that James uses in 4:5 to describe the activity of the spirit (*ἐπιποθέω*, *epipotheo* “to yearn” cf: ESV rendering) is used just a handful of times in the Septuagint for a small range of Hebrew verbs, but I want to focus on one specific verse: Deuteronomy 32:11. For this passage, the NASB reads,

“Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, That hovers over its young, He spread His wings and caught them, He carried them on His pinions.”

The Hebrew for “hovers” here is the *pi’el* verb form of the rare root *רחף* *rachaf*, used in only one other place in the Torah, Genesis 1:2: “And the Spirit of God *hovers* (מְרַחֵף) over the surface of the waters.” The Septuagint does not translate this verb the same in each instance, but for the Deuteronomy verse it does employ the same verb as James 4:5, *epipotheo*. Thus, we have evidence that the semantic range of *epipotheo* included that of the Hebrew *pi’el* of *rachaf*.

Why is this observation significant? Because both the Dead Sea Scrolls and Rabbinic Literature indicate an ancient midrashic tradition associating this rare Hebrew verb *rachaf* with a Messiah figure.

The Wings of the Messiah

A famous fragment from Qumran, known as *4QMessianic Apocalypse* (4Q521) contains the following line about the Messiah:

ועל ענוים רוחו תרחף ואמונים יחליף בכחו

“Over the humble ones (ענוים, *‘anavim*, from ענה) His spirit hovers (תרחף, *tirachef*, from רחף), and the faithful He will renew with His power...” (Frag 2, Col. 2, Line 6)

“Scripturally-atuned” readers will catch the whispers of Genesis 1:2, Deuteronomy 32:11 and Isaiah 40:31 that are alluded to here. “Spirit” and “hover” from Genesis, “renew” and “strength” from Isaiah (*nesher* “eagle” is implied, as it is shared by both the Deuteronomy and Isaiah verses), and “hovers” from Deuteronomy. The richness of this Hebrew poetry from Qumran bursts off of the page when its specific resonances with the Tanakh are felt.

Within the broad and diverse corpus of “rabbinic literature” is preserved a few trickles of tannaitic tradition that, like our fragment from the Dead Sea Scrolls, also exhibit interest in the Torah’s use of this unique root *רחף*. The Bavli places one such tradition in the mouth of a semi-famous non-Rabbi. “Ben Zoma said... *And the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters... this is like a dove (ביונה) which hovers over her young without touching*” (bHag 15a). In the Yerushalmi’s version of the teaching (Hag 9a), the verses from Deuteronomy and Genesis are specifically cited together, the verb *rachaf* as the connector. Genesis Rabbah 2:4 also preserves the

2. For this meaning, see BDAG, p. 874, 3.d.α. for definition and parallels.

Ben Zoma tradition, alongside another, more specific interpretation: “*And the spirit of God hovered... this is the spirit of the King Messiah*” (זה רוחו של מלך המשיח).

Another instance along this midrashic trajectory is found in one of the Aramaic translations (*Targum*) to Genesis 1:2. For “*the Spirit of God hovered over the surface of the waters,*” Targum Neofit reads, “*the Spirit of Mercies from before the Lord blows over the surface of the waters...*” The targumist expanded the Hebrew רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים *Ru’ach Elohim* “Spirit of God” to דְּרַחֲמֵי רִוּחָא *rucha d’rachamin* “spirit of mercies (before the Lord)” Recall that in Hebrew and Aramaic, the word רַחֵם *rechem* has a semantic range that includes “womb” and “love.” Such words evoke imagery similar to that in John 3: being “born from above/of the Spirit” and “*God so loved the world...*”

The data points from the extra-biblical sources, though stemming from very different times and places, can be plotted next to passages from the Apostolic Writings to demonstrate that these Messianic readings were not limited to a simple, narrow distribution within the early Ekklesia. For example, John 1:32 “*the Spirit of God like a dove*” (and parallels) predates the saying captured in the Bavli centuries later, as does Yeshua’s cry over the Holy City in Matthew 23:37, “*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!*” (ESV). Thus, we have evidence from Qumran, Targum, and Rabbinic Literature that fits well with this Messianic “mothering” theme found in the Gospels. “*Wisdom is justified of her children.*”

The Spirit of the Messiah, according to the Apostolic Writings, is given to us by God. This is the Spirit by whom we cry “Abba, Father!” and by whom we are able to put to death the deeds of the flesh. It is no longer our life, but that of Messiah Yeshua. Perhaps we’ve been conditioned to think of this type of instruction as typically “Pauline,” but I am hoping to demonstrate that this same teaching is found in the Epistle of Ya’akov (James).

James and Yom HaKippurim

With all these things in mind, let’s have another look at James 4:1-10 (ESV modified with my proposed translation for v. 5):

James 4:1-10

1 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? **2** You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. **3** You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. **4** You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. **5** Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says that the Spirit that He caused to dwell in us yearns against envy? **6** But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “*God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.*” **7** Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. **8** Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. **9** Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. **10** Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

When James tells us to “submit,” to “resist,” to “draw near,” to “cleanse,” to “purify,” and to “humble ourselves,” are we to do this of our own power? That is not possible! Rather, it is by His power, given to us in the form of the Holy Spirit that we can do such things. Indeed, it is His Spirit in us that “yearns” *against* the works of the flesh; by His power we can actually obey these exhortations. These key verbs for James - “humble,” “draw near (Heb: *haqriv*, an idiom meaning to make an offering),” and “cleanse” - hold a significant place in the instructions for *Yom Kippur* (cf. Lev. 16:29-31 and 23:27).

As we move through the themes of these Fall Feasts, let us each remember that on the Day of Atonement we seek to humble ourselves, putting to death the deeds of our sinful nature, that His life might be manifest in us. Remember, it really is about Him, and “*the Spirit He has made to dwell in us yearns against envy*”! By His grace and with His guidance, may our humility on Yom Kippur prepare us to yield all the more to His exalted

Spirit as we celebrate Sukkot, the dwelling of God with us in our daily walk of faith. Let us cling to the promise that within these earthly “tabernacles” the eternal life of our King, Messiah Yeshua, will reign!