

CHAPTER FIVE

THE TONGUE SET ON FIRE BY HELL (JAMES 3:6)

James 3:6 is a notoriously difficult verse. The problems usually discussed concern the middle part of the verse (ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας ἢ γλῶσσα καθίσταται ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν ἡμῶν ἢ σπιλοῦσα ὄλον τὸ σῶμα).¹ In this chapter we shall not be concerned with these, but rather with the last two phrases of the verse (καὶ φλογίζουσα τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως καὶ φλογιζομένη ὑπὸ τῆς γεέννης), which are commonly regarded as relatively unproblematic.

Whatever the meaning of the middle part of the verse, it is clear that the two concluding phrases continue the image of the tongue as a destructive fire which was introduced in verses 5b-6a. Omitting the problematic middle part of verse 6, we have:

ἰδοὺ ἡλίκον πῦρ ἡλίκην ὕλην ἀνάπτει·
καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα πῦρ·

...

καὶ φλογίζουσα τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως
καὶ φλογιζομένη ὑπὸ τῆς γεέννης.

See how small a fire sets alight so large a forest!
The tongue is a fire.

...

setting on fire the wheel of existence
and being set on fire by Gehenna.

By contrast with the extensive debates about the meaning of much of verse 6, most commentators are agreed on the meaning of its last four words. They think it obvious that these words refer to the source of the tongue's power for evil. The tongue derives its dangerous power from the devil or the forces of evil, here symbolized by or located in

¹ In my view there is much to be said for correcting the text in accordance with the Peshitta, inserting ὕλη after ἀδικίας (so J. Adamson, *The Epistle of James* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976] 158-159, who correctly refutes Mayor's argument against this). Vv 5b-6a can then be translated: 'See how small a fire sets alight so large a forest [wood]! The tongue is a fire, the sinful world wood.' The first sentence states the image, which the second interprets by identifying the two elements in the allegory. The image is then picked up again in v 6b ('setting on fire the wheel of existence...'), where τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως is synonymous with ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας.

hell (Gehenna).² In Moo's words: 'The power of Satan himself, the chief denizen of hell, gives to the tongue its great destructive potential.'³

To this, the usual interpretation there are two insuperable objections: (1) In first-century Jewish and Christian thought Gehenna is not the location of the devil or of the forces of evil. It is the place where the wicked are punished, either after the last judgment or (a view which seems to have been emerging during the first century) after death. Its angels, terrifying and cruel as they are, are servants of God, executing God's judgment on sin.⁴ They are not the evil angels who rebel against and resist God. These evil angels, with Satan or the devil at their head, will at the end of history be sent to their doom in Gehenna, but they are not there yet. Rather, they inhabit the terrestrial area from the earth to the lowest heavenly sphere. (It is with this area that James associates them when he contrasts the wisdom that comes from heaven with the false wisdom that is earthly [ἐπίγειος] and demonic [δαμονιώδης] [3:15].) (2) The fire of Gehenna is always a means or an image of God's judgment. Thus, even if James were supposing that the devil is already being punished in hell, it would make no sense to speak of the fire of Gehenna as the source from which human evil is inspired.

Some of the commentators do claim to provide evidence for locating the devil in Gehenna, but it is not evidence which bears careful examination. Thus Dibelius, who knows that the issue has been contested and realises at least that it was not common to regard Gehenna as the dwelling of Satan,⁵ claims: 'That Satan dwells there is expressly stated for the first time in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. Jas 3:6 is therefore evidence of great significance for the history of religions.'⁶ He refers

² E.g. J. B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St James* (2nd edition; London: Macmillan, 1897) 114; J. Chaine, *L'Épître de Saint Jacques* (Paris: Gabalda, 1927) 83; C. L. Mitton, *The Epistle of James* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1966) 128-129; M. Dibelius, *James* (revised by H. Greeven; trans. M. A. Williams; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 198; S. Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (London: A. & C. Black, 1980) 151-152; P. Davids, *The Epistle of James* (NIGTC; Exeter: Paternoster, 1982) 143; R. P. Martin, *James* (WBC 48; Waco: Word Books, 1988) 116; L. T. Johnson, *The Letter of James* (AB 37A; New York: Doubleday, 1995) 259-256.

³ D. J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (TNTC; Leicester: IVP/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 126; cf. W. R. Baker, *Personal Speech-Ethics in the Epistle of James* (WUNT 2/68; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1995) 128: 'what is conveyed here is tht [*sic*] the person who does not control his tongue makes his tongue an agent for Satan's harmful designs on the individual and society.'

⁴ On the angels of hell, see chapter 8 below, section III.8.

⁵ Dibelius, *James*, 199 n. 87.

⁶ Dibelius, *James*, 198. This comment is echoed by J. Marty, *L'épître de Jacques: Étude critique* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1935) 130.