

**THE KEPHALAIA STRUCTURE:
HOW IT BRINGS CLARITY AND PURPOSE TO THE BOOK OF JAMES**

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Introduction

The book of James has two specific areas of difficulty for those who would study the letter. The first area deals with whether or not the book has a provided structure and the second area are the passages in James that are complicated to interpret. When structure is found in a letter, a guide to interpreting that letter is provided. God intended to reveal Himself to mankind; it is important for such revelation to be clear. It is crucial that communication should use tools that bring about such clarity. The most sensible tool in communication through writing is a structure or outline. An outline becomes evident in the book of James when some important considerations are made.

I. The Structure of the book of James

The book of James has an obstacle to those who would study it in finding a structure to the letter. Based on the average commentary, there is no single way over this obstacle but many variant ways to get over this obstacle. Commentators such as Edmond Hiebert do not see a clear structure given to the book of James. He says “The epistle itself does not herald any clear structural plan concerning the organization of its contents.”¹ Other commentators may go as far as William Hendriksen, who says “A superficial glance at this epistle may easily leave the impression that every attempt to outline it must fail.”²

While outlining the book of James may be difficult and stands as an obstacle, this obstacle is overcome, and the difficulty is washed away when the student takes into account that there is an ancient structure used in a particular form of Greek speeches. The ancient structure

¹ Hiebert “The Unifying Theme of the Epistle of James” (pg. 221)

² Hendriksen “Bible Survey: A Treasury of Bible Information” (pg. 329)

was undoubtedly known to James who was an early church leader and teacher. This structure made use of “kephalaia,” which is the Greek word for headings.

A typical use of this structure is explained by John Niemela. He says, “Greek rhetoricians used thematic statements near the end of their prologues to indicate their overall outline.”³ These outlines are what Zane Hodges identifies as the kephalaia, seen in his statement, “In the Roman age the main body of a speech or discourse was called the kephalaia (headings) by the Greek rhetoricians (Kennedy, *Rhetorical*, p. 48).”⁴ The headings were used as a tool by ancient Greek communicators to guide and bring their students into the knowledge being communicated. Greek society made much of knowledge shared through oral presentation (cf. Acts 17:21). James would have been well aware of Greek rhetorical tools and their benefits. Rhetorical tools that help in memorization and retention of the knowledge being shared would have been ideal. The kephalaia structure offers an efficient way of grasping a few main ideas of a larger speech through the headings that are proclaimed in a thematic statement. The typical structure in use in a letter consists of the epilogue, the thematic statement, the headings, and finally the prologue.⁵

II. The evidence of the Kephalaia Structure in the book of James

Following the typical outline of a kephalaia structured message, evidence in the book of James leads to the conclusion of its use by the apostle James.

The kephalaia structure introduces its theme through the use of certain keywords at the beginning of the presentation. James provides the keywords “trials” (Js. 1:2) and “temptation” (Js. 1:12, 13, 14). James introduces his theme conceptually by reminding his audience (who are

³ Niemela “Faith Without Works: A Definition” (pg. 6)

⁴ Hodges “The Epistle of James: Proven Character through Testing” (pg. 37)

⁵ Thomas “Sermon: James 1:19 The Theme - Part 1 [Revised]”

believers) that they have been “brought forth by the word of truth” and are therefore children of the “Father of lights.” The responsibility of a child of the Father of lights is to live following the order of life that is prescribed by Him. In the context of the book of James, the order of life prescribed by God starts with having the wisdom of God (Js. 1:5). By the end of these introductory thoughts, James provides the structure to the rest of his message that will provide a solution to the issues he has introduced.

The reader of James comes to a transition when they arrive at James 1:19. James says “So then,” (NKJV). This is a marker for transition, made in light of the thematic elements he has brought up at the beginning of his message. The Thematic statement follows “let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.” These three headings set the outline of the body of James message which is elaborated in the rest of the book. However, the thematic statement is concluded in verse 20 with “for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” James connects his theme of living like children of the Father of lights with his three headings. When all three headings are followed, the believer effectively endures trials from without, and temptations from within, and is brought to maturity (cf. 1:4). The headings “be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath” make up the body of James’ message and are easily memorized.

In his elaboration of the heading “be quick to hear,” James gives details of that which his audience should hear. In summary, James’ audience is to be quick to hear the word of God (cf. 1:21). James then elaborates the content of what they need to hear but also gives the imperative to be a “doer” of the Word of God (1:22). The heading that deals with being quick to hear do not appear to end until James 2:26. James argues that a child of the Father of lights must have

knowledge of God's revelation, and be practicing it in their life or it is of no profit and is dead (cf. 2:14, 16, 17, 20, 26).

James begins the second heading in James 3:1. It is connected to the first heading because James says "let not many of you become teachers." James recognizes that a primary means by which people will hear the word and go on to be "doers" is by having it taught to them by a teacher. The teaching position is warned by James as being a serious matter, and correlates to the heading of being "slow to speak." It is no coincidence that the verses that follow have to deal with the power and influence of the tongue. This gives further evidence that James is elaborating on his second heading "be slow to speak" and provides marks of a typical kephalaia structure.

The third heading, "be slow to wrath," is seen as beginning in James 4:1 with a transition of the outworking of man's wrath. The third heading is connected to the heading before it, as that heading was connected to the one before it. These headings are seen to be progressive. If one is a hearer and a doer of the word, they will have a controlled tongue and speech, and then have a controlled body that does not result in the wrath of man. Much of what is contained in the elaboration of this third heading has to do with its origin. James interestingly says it originates in man's lust and desires (cf. 1:14; 4:1) and is a result of having an "earthly, sensual, and demonic" wisdom. Such a wisdom is the opposite of godly wisdom and is at war with God (cf. 4:4).

The final element to a typical kephalaia structure is the prologue. This is the part in the presentation that brings the entire message to a conclusion. A conclusion is hinted at in James 5:7, with the transition word "therefore." It would stand to reason that, in light of the body of James' letter and his elaborated headings, "be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath" he now brings his message to a conclusion. This is apparent in his reminder of the end times hope of Jesus' return, (cf. 5:7-9) and the examples of those who endured trials (cf. 10-11, 17-18).

III. The significance of the Kephalaia Structure in the book of James

The significance of the kephalaia structure in the book of James is crucial to correctly handle what is in the letter. There are three major areas of significance to the use of the kephalaia structure in the book of James. The first is that it gives purpose to the letter. The second is that it provides guidance through tough passages. The third is that it helps avoid potential theological presuppositions brought to the difficult texts.

The benefits of any form or structure to a written or oral message are that it provides purpose to the message being given. It can be safely assumed that God had a purpose in revealing Himself to Man. As previously discussed, James does provide an apparent structure to his letter. Recognizing the specific kephalaia structure used by James provides specific information regarding the purpose of the book of James. A significant step to finding this purpose is to identify the thesis statement, as well as the epilogue.⁶

The second major area of significance to the use of a kephalaia structure to a message is that the structure used serves as a roadmap to arrive at the proper destination intended by the author. The book of James has been the battleground for many theological battles over the centuries, and most of them revolve around the correct understanding of James 2:14-26. Recognition of the kephalaia structure provides an answer to interpretive problems. John Niemela explains this solution when he says “Does James 2:14–26 belong to the Swift to Hear section (1:21–2:26)? If so, then divorcing the concepts of faith and salvation in 2:14–26 from

⁶ Porter “Oral Texts? A Reassessment Of The Oral And Rhetorical Nature Of Paul’s Letters In Light Of Recent Studies” (pg. 328)

1:21–2:26 would have devastating consequences for any sound exegesis of the book as a whole.”⁷

The last point of significance in the kephalaia structure of the book of James is that it avoids theological presuppositions being forced on the book. If a discernable structure is not seen or observed, then some scholars tend to manufacture one that stems from their presupposed theology.⁸

Conclusion

If the book of James has a natural structure that flows out of the letter itself as provided by its author, then there is a guide to interpreting the letter. The kephalaia structure was a tool of communication used in the days of the apostle James. The fact that his letter is fashioned in a way that models a kephalaia structure, reasonably assumes that it was intentional. When we look at the book of James through the understanding of the kephalaia structure a greater understanding of the entire scope of James is achieved. When we pick up certain cues that an author sets down, we have what is needed to know what was intended. Therefore, the kephalaia structure brings clarity and purpose to the book of James.

⁷ Niemela “Faith Without Works: A Definition” (pg. 6)

⁸Arnold Fruchtenbaum does this in his commentary “Ariel’s Bible Commentary: The Messianic Jewish Epistles; Edmond Hiebert in his article “The unifying theme of the Epistle of James”; C.I. Scofield does this in his study Bible “Scofield Study Bible”

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