

Translating James 4:5

Indeed, James 4:5 is one of the most difficult verses in the NT.¹

This paper is a beginning attempt to understand James 4:5.

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Text and Translations²

First, consider the variety of English translations of the verse.

The first half of the verse is straightforward, with few variations of ἡ γραφή (*hē graphē*), literally “the writing” (singular). This is typically translated Scripture (or scripture), with occasional exceptions such as “Holy Writings.”

ἢ δοκεῖτε ὅτι κενῶς ἡ γραφή λέγει; (THGNT)

Or do you think that the Scripture says to no purpose that (AMP)

Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, (ESV)

Do ye think that the Scripture saith in vain, (GNV)

Or do you think it's without reason the Scripture says that (HCSB)

Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, (KJV)

Or do you imagine that scripture has no meaning · when it says, (MOUNCE)

Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: (NASB1995)

Or do you suppose that it is without reason that Scripture says, (NCB)

Or do you think the scripture means nothing when it says,(NET)

Or do you think Scripture says without reason (NIV 1984)

Or do you think Scripture says without reason (NIV 2011)

Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, (NKJV)

Do you think the Holy Writings mean nothing when they said, (NLV)

Do you think the Scriptures have no meaning? They say that (NLT)

Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, (NRSV)

Douglas Moo³ points out that γραφή in the NT is limited to references to the canonical OT rather than a hypothetical lost apocryphal text. Vlachos points to the next sentence: “The repetition of the verb λέγω in v. 6 to introduce an OT quotation suggests that James has a specific text in mind, though the singular could refer to OT Scripture as a whole (cf. John 7:37-39; cf. HCSB).”⁴ [*The HCSB*⁵ translation is “Or do

¹ Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 188.

² <https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/James%204:5>

³ Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 190.

⁴ Chris A. Vlachos, *James: Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013), 136.

⁵ <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=James%204:4-6&version=HCSB>

you think it's without reason the Scripture says that the Spirit who lives in us yearns jealously? – mw]
But Peter Davids raises the objection, “Yet precisely this citation forms one of the thorniest problems in the epistle, for if James cites scripture, which one does he cite? The citation of Pr. 3:34 LXX in 4:6 is obvious, but what is cited in 4:5?⁶

Additional “thorny” problems (beyond the source of the citation) come in the second half of the verse. The neuter noun τὸ πνεῦμα (*ta pneuma*, the spirit) and the vocabulary of the verbal phrase πρὸς φθόνον ἐπιποθεῖ (*pros phthonon epitoei*) provide multiple thorns, as evidenced by the variations in translations.

πρὸς φθόνον ἐπιποθεῖ τὸ πνεῦμα ὃ κατώκισεν ἐν ἡμῖν (THGNT)

the [human] spirit which He has made to dwell in us lusts with envy? (AMP)

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

The spirit that dwelleth in us, lusteth after envy? (GNV)

the Spirit who lives in us yearns jealously? (HCSB)

The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy? (KJV)

God yearns jealously over the spirit that he has placed in us? (MOUNCE)

He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us? (NASB1995, with marginal alternative)

OR *The spirit which He has made to dwell in us lusts with envy.*

The spirit that God caused to live within us has an envious yearning?(NET)

that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? (NIV 1984, with two marginal alternatives)

OR *that God jealously longs for the spirit that he made to live in us*

OR *that the Spirit he caused to live in us longs jealously*

that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? (NIV 2011, with two marginal alternatives)

OR *that the spirit he caused to dwell in us envies intensely*

OR *that the Spirit he caused to dwell in us longs jealously*

The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously? (NKJV)

The Holy Spirit Whom God has given to live in us has a strong desire for us to be faithful to Him? (NLV)

God is passionate that the spirit he has placed within us should be faithful to him (NLT)

God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us? (NRSV; cited by Moo⁷)

Consider the problems in the categories of [theology](#), [grammar](#), [vocabulary](#), and [context](#).

Theology

Is τὸ πνεῦμα (*ta pneuma*) to be understood as “the spirit” (i.e., the human spirit) or “the Spirit” (the Holy Spirit indwelling the believer)?

James’s only other mention of *pneuma* (2:26) is the human spirit related to the human body. Therefore, a reference here (in 4:5) to the Holy Spirit would presume an existing familiarity with the doctrine of the Trinity or at least the divine personhood of the Spirit. But “James never elsewhere refers to the Holy Spirit,”⁸ and even questions whether “a clear theology of the Spirit had been well worked out by the time James wrote.”⁹

⁶ Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (NIGTC) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 162.

⁷ Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 188.

⁸ Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 190.

⁹ Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 175; Moo makes this comment related to a different point in his discussion, but the issue of the development of the theology of the Holy Spirit is still relevant.

With those considerations in mind, the conclusion seems reasonable that James here is referring to the human spirit.

(In the interest of full disclosure, two of the older commentators, Oesterley¹⁰ and Mayor¹¹, interpret *ta pneuma* as the Holy Spirit. The remaining sources primarily used in this study concur that James's intention is the human spirit.)

Grammar

The translation and interpretation of the verse is complicated by the neuter noun τὸ πνεῦμα (*to pneuma*). Neuter nouns have the same form for both the subject of a sentence or an object in the sentence. Or more technically, "In the neuter, the nominative and accusative singular are always the same...."¹² Usually, in the majority of nouns with masculine or feminine grammatical gender, the subject and object of a noun are differentiated by distinct forms. But in the case of neuter nouns, this can be (to the English translator) potentially ambiguous. Context becomes even more important than usual in determining the meaning of a sentence.

The specific issue for James 4:5 is the alternative between:

- τὸ πνεῦμα (*to pneuma*) as the subject of the sentence, as in the NIV 1984 translation: "the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely"
- τὸ πνεῦμα (*to pneuma*) as the object of the sentence, as in the NIV 2011 translation: "he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us"

To summarize, is it the [human] spirit that does the longing OR does someone (God?) long for the [human] spirit?

Assuming as discussed above, that the spirit James has in mind is the human spirit, the following shows samples of translations that take each alternative.

spirit as subject

The spirit that dwelleth in us, lusteth† after envy‡? (GNV)

The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth† to envy‡? (KJV)

"The spirit that God caused to live within us has an envious‡ yearning†"? (NET)

the spirit he caused to live in us envies‡ intensely†? (NIV 1984)

This could be James's description of the symptom of the adulterous ones (v. 4), flirting with the world instead of staying faithful to God.

spirit as object

"He yearns† jealously‡ over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? (ESV)

"God yearns† jealously‡ over the spirit that he has placed in us"? (MOUNCE)

he jealously‡ longs† for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? (NIV 2011)

God yearns† jealously‡ for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us? (NRSV – cited by Moo)

This could be James's description of God's jealousy for the absolute faithfulness of His people.

¹⁰ W.E. Oesterley, *The General Epistle of James, The Expositor's Greek Testament, Volume Four* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976; initially published in 1897), 459.

¹¹ Joseph B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James; The Greek Text with Introduction and Comments* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1978; initially published in 1892), 217.

¹² William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1993), 35.

In either case, whether the neuter noun “spirit” is taken as the subject of the sentence (nominative case) or the object of the sentence (accusative case), the verse supports the immediately preceding accusation of adultery. Since the grammar of the text does not provide definitive clarity, consider the vocabulary James uses.

Vocabulary

The phrase variously translated “jealously longs” or “yearns jealously” consists of the two words φθόνον‡ ἐπιποθεῖ† (*phthonon epipothei*). [The markers ‡ and † are added for reference in the comments and samples below.] As it happens, each of the two words occur nine times in the New Testament, but this is the only example of the two words immediately together.

†Note that all eight other NT uses of the word (ἐπιποθέω, *epipotheō*) are in positive contexts indicating strong desire for reunion with other believers (e.g., Romans 1:11) or the ultimate longing for heaven (2 Corinthians 5:2).

‡Note that all eight other NT uses of the word (φθόνος, *phthonos*) are in negative contexts and translated “envy.” This would be the only NT instance where the word is used of God. Cf. another NT word (ζηλόω, *zēloō*) with similar range of meanings: negative jealousy or envy (6x, including James 4:2), positive zealously or eagerly (5x).¹³ Trench admits that ζηλόω is used sometimes in a good sense, sometimes in an evil sense, but he claims φθόνος is “incapable of good, is used always and only in an evil signification.”¹⁴

While the two words never occur immediately together elsewhere in the NT, Peter uses them in successive sentences, and his usage highlights their disparate connotations, one strongly negative, one strongly positive.

¹ So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy [φθόνος, *phthonos*] and all slander. ² Like newborn infants, long for [ἐπιποθέω, *epipotheō*] the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation. (1 Peter 2:1-2)

It seems we have a combination of two words (φθόνον ἐπιποθεῖ), one of which is predominately negative, one predominantly positive. In this combination one or the other must be (it seems) interpreted as an exception to the majority of its other occurrences. Either φθόνος is here uniquely positive (“jealously” instead of the more frequent “envy”), or ἐπιποθέω is here uniquely negative (“lust” instead of “longing”).

Consider one representative sample translation from each alternative. (The two NIV versions were selected with the added interest of a translation that changed perspective on this issue through several decades of revisions. It should be noted that both the 1984 and 2011 versions include marginal notes giving the alternative translation.)

spirit as subject

the spirit he caused to live in us envies‡ intensely† (NIV 1984)

In this case, φθόνος would maintain its typical negative meaning of “envy,” while the usually positive ἐπιποθέω would have to be taken negatively, such as “lustfully” (where NIV 1984 uses “intensely”). This would fit the metaphor of adultery James uses, “a warning against any flirtation with the attitudes and values of the world in v.4.”¹⁵ However, the NIV 1984 translation seems to border on paraphrase, since it seems to change the noun φθόνος to a verbal equivalent, “envies,” and the verb ἐπιποθέω to an adverb, “intensely.” The NKJV maintains the

¹³ <https://www.billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/zeloo>

¹⁴ Richard C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 87; Originally published in 1854.

¹⁵ Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 190.

spirit as the subject but keeps the parts of speech closer to the original: “The Spirit who dwells in us yearns† jealously‡.”

spirit as object

he jealously‡ longs† for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us (NIV 2011)

In this case, ἐπιποθέω would maintain its typical positive meaning of “longing,” but φθόνος would require a positive connotation of “jealousy,” a “reminder of God’s desire that his people be wholly and unreservedly his.”¹⁶

As mentioned above, “φθόνος and its cognates are never used positively in the NT, rarely in secular Greek. . . . Nor does the root ever translate the Hebrew *qn*’, indicating God’s jealousy, in the LXX.”¹⁷ In fact, two clear NT references to divine jealousy (1 Corinthians 10:22; 2 Corinthians 11:2) both use ζηλόω (*zēloō*) or its cognates for “jealousy,” never φθόνος. Even Moo, who supports the “divine jealousy” construction (“spirit” as the object of God’s jealous longing), concedes that “while unusual, James’s uses of *phthonos* with respect to God’s desire for his people is not impossible.”¹⁸ That hardly seems definitive evidence for that position.

Also note that in all other eight occurrences the yearning or longing is unfulfilled, even disappointed or frustrated. Is God’s “yearning” for us frustrated? Or does this support the alternate translation that our spirit’s envious cravings are the cause of our adulterous abandonment of God?

(To see all the New Testament usages of φθόνος and ἐπιποθέω, refer to the Appendix at the end of this paper.)

Context

Consider the immediate context of verse 5.

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.

(James 4:4)

...

But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

(James 4:6)

The context is clearly about the adulterous practices of friendship (or “flirtation”¹⁹) with the world (v. 4) and God’s gracious reception of the “adulterous people” who humbly return to Him (v. 5) and the restored intimate relationship (v. 8).

God’s righteous jealousy is clearly implied, but the focus is on the guilt of the adulterous people in their flirtatious failures. The grace He gives is “greater” (μείζονα, *meizona*, the comparative form of μέγας, *megas*), enough to cover all the unfaithfulness of the people who reject friendship with the world.

With this context, interpreting “spirit” as the object of v. 5 (“he longs for the spirit,” NIV2011) would shift the focus from the adulterous people (v. 4), to God who is offended (v. 5), then to God’s response (v. 6).

¹⁶ Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 190.

¹⁷ Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (NIGTC) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 163.

¹⁸ Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 190.

¹⁹ Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 190.

On the other hand, if “spirit” is taken as the subject of v. 5 (“the spirit envies,” NIV1984), then there is a consistent thread from the accusation of adultery (v. 4), the warning sign of the adultery (v. 5), assurance of God’s grace (v. 6), and then an extended exhortation to genuine humility and repentance (v. 7-10; “submit...resist...draw near, etc.). “The spirit envies” describes the internal attitudes that result in external friendship and flirtation with the world. This interpretation continues the focus on the adulterous people who James later addresses as “sinners” and “double minded” (v. 8b). The weight of the passage is on the harsh condemnation of the friendship with the world that distracts from devotion to the Living God. The power of the passage is that the briefest of affirmations, “He gives greater grace,” answers and more than counters that weight.

(Again, for the purpose of full disclosure, the two older commentaries, Oesterley and Mayor, agree that *ta pneuma* is the subject of the sentence, but in the sense of the Holy Spirit longing rather than the human spirit as suggested here. The remaining commentators consider “spirit”, i.e., the human spirit, to be the object of God’s longing.)

And Therefore...

As interesting (and as challenging) as this study has been (at least for this author), what does it lead us to? Is there a significant theological or practical difference between the two interpretative alternatives, “spirit” as the subject or “spirit” as the object of verse 5?

There is also a practical question, especially in a group studying the Bible. Are the differences among translations and the various views of respected scholars cause for concern? How do we deal with differences in reliable translations of the Bible? Do we ignore them? Do we give up in confusion? What can we learn when my Bible seems to say something different from your Bible? And how do we respond to the skeptic who uses the difference to disbelieve the whole Bible?

For this “most difficult of verses” the differences are real but do not impact the point James presses on his readers. The flow of James’s thinking is clear. Verse 5, in either interpretation, supports his emphasis on the incalculable impact of transferring affections away from God and toward the world. The slippery slope of sin can take us from seemingly superficial slips into absolute abandonment of the faith. Whether James is inserting the perspective of God’s righteous jealousy, or if he is illustrating the inner working of our wayward spirits, the thrust of his argument is the same.

Like [other less dramatic differences](#) in English versions, the alternative wordings of James 4:5 have no substantial impact on the Bible’s message. If this case is any indication, differences in translations have the beneficial effect of prompting further and deeper study of the passage.

From this passage, we can examine ourselves to find how much we have slipped into friendship with the world. Any additional energy spent debating the relative merit of one or the other alternative interpretations will be better spent understanding and applying the list of exhortations in verses 7-10:

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.

Appendix: NT Usages

These lists from the Bill Mounce web site (<https://www.billmounce.com/>) provide all of the NT references for the two words φθόνος and ἐπιποθέω.

φθόνος

<https://www.billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/phthonos> 9x (all other uses are negative)

Gloss: envy

Matthew 27:18	For he knew that it was out of envy (φθόνον acc sg masc) that they had handed him over.
Mark 15:10	For he knew that the ruling priests had handed Jesus over out of envy (φθόνον acc sg masc).
Romans 1:29	They are filled with every kind of unrighteousness, wickedness, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy (φθόνου gen sg masc), murder, strife, deceit, meanness. They are gossips,
Galatians 5:21	envyings (φθόνοι nom pl masc), drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before: those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God!
Philippians 1:15	To be sure, some are proclaiming Christ out of envy (φθόνον acc sg masc) and strife, but others out of goodwill.
1 Timothy 6:4	he is puffed up with conceit, understanding nothing, but has a sickly craving for speculations and fights about words out of which come envy (φθόνος nom sg masc), strife, slanders, evil suspicions,
Titus 3:3	For once we ourselves also were foolish, disobedient, being led astray, being enslaved by desires and various pleasures, living a life of evil and envy (φθόνῳ dat sg masc), detestable, hating one another.
James 4:5	Or do you imagine that scripture has no meaning when it says, “God yearns jealously over the spirit that he has placed in us”? <i>[Mounce does not provide the parsing for this verse. – mw]</i>
1 Peter 2:1	Therefore, having put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy (φθόνους acc pl masc) and slander of every kind,

ἐπιποθέω

<https://www.billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/epipotheo> 9x (all in positive context)

Gloss: to long for, crave, desire

Romans 1:11	For I long (ἐπιποθῶ pres act ind 1 sg) to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you —
2 Corinthians 5:2	For indeed in this tent we groan, longing (ἐπιποθοῦντες pres act ptcp nom pl masc) to put on our heavenly dwelling place,
2 Corinthians 9:14	And in their prayers on your behalf they yearn (ἐπιποθούντων pres act ptcp gen pl masc) for you because of the surpassing grace of God bestowed on you.
Philippians 1:8	For God is my witness that I long (ἐπιποθῶ pres act ind 1 sg) for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.
Philippians 2:26	because he has been longing (ἐπιποθῶν pres act ptcp nom sg masc) for all of you and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill.
1 Thessalonians 3:6	But just now Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and your love; and that you always think of us with affection and long (ἐπιποθοῦντες pres act ptcp nom pl masc) to see us even as we long to see you.
2 Timothy 1:4	yearning (ἐπιποθῶν pres act ptcp nom sg masc) to see you, remembering your tears, so that I may be filled with joy,
James 4:5	Or do you imagine that scripture has no meaning when it says, “God yearns jealously over (ἐπιποθεῖ pres act ind 3 sg) the spirit that he has placed in us”? [cf. <i>The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?</i> (KJV) <i>The spirit that God caused to live within us has an envious yearning</i> ”? (NET) – mw]
1 Peter 2:2	like newborn babes, crave (ἐπιποθήσατε aor act imperative 2 pl) the milk that is pure and spiritual, so that by it you may grow up to salvation,