Title: An exegetical theological interpretation of “the perfect law of liberty” in James

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Abstract:

The expression “the perfect law of liberty” in Jas 1:25 poses a major interpretative problem. This expression may be, however, the crux of the epistle. Indeed the Christian who understands the meaning of the perfect law of liberty and apprehends and explains by its light all that precedes and follows, will hold the key to the entire epistle.

The expression has some conceptual parallels within Jewish and Hellenistic—especially Stoic—beliefs. Within the Jewish tradition the law was considered to be perfect, converting the soul (Ps 19:7), and those who keep the commandments were deemed to be able to walk at liberty (Ps 119:44, 45 KJV). Among the Stoics, freedom comes from obedience to the universal law of Reason, that law which is held in common by all intelligent creatures. To live in accordance with the universal law means to act in accordance with one’s own nature.

In spite of the resemblances to other portions of scripture, the expression “perfect law of liberty” is unique to James. James, as a Jew himself, draws more heavily from Jewish beliefs than from other sources in his writing. In forming this expression James presupposes his readers have a living faith relationship with the Lord of glory.

Parallels can be drawn between the situation of Israel at Mt. Sinai and that of the original readers of James’ epistle. The Israelites at Mt. Sinai received the law after God had delivered
them from bondage. God continued to take care of them in the wilderness. The Israelites received the law, not as a means to be set free, but as a means to realize their God-given freedom. Continued trust in their deliverer, manifested by obeying his commandments, meant their freedom. Their liberty consisted not only in protection from neighboring hostile tribes, but also from evil impulses within. Kept by God from evil within and without, they were free to be a holy people.

Similarly James’ original readers were already believers in God, as manifested in Jesus Christ in his early ministry, already delivered from their former slavery to sin. James called them to look with steadfast gaze into the perfect law of liberty and to keep the law. In so doing Christians would be blessed. The same law, the Decalogue, that God gave the Israelites for their freedom is the one that James presents to his readers. This law is summed up in the one double command of love to God and to mankind. The law in the expanded form, however, consists of all God’s “statues and judgments” (Deut 11:1 cf 12:1 KJV). The prophets’ expositions may be said to be part of the expanded form of the Decalogue, according to Jesus (Matt 22:40 KJV).

As James’ original readers continually acknowledge God’s saving grace within them and do God’s commandments, they would walk at liberty. By doing the law, Christians obtain liberty. The law thus is the perfect law of liberty.