The Destructive Power of the Tongue as a *Verbum Inefficax*: A Canonical-Literary Reading of James 3:1–12 through the Lens of Speech-Act Theory[1]

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Abstract

The major premise of this journal article is that human speech is either categorized as a *verbum efficax* or a *verbum inefficax*. On the one hand, as argued in section one, human speech as a *verbum efficax* is efficacious. Yet, as argued in section two, human speech as a *verbum inefficax* is inefficacious. In terms of methodology, section one puts forward an introductory thesis by concisely overviewing speech-act theory, especially as it relates to the efficacious proclamation of the gospel. Next, section two articulates a subsequent antithesis (i.e., how speech can be harmful) by examining James 3:1–12 through the lens of speech-act theory. This includes elucidating the passage's rhetorical and literary structure, along with expositing its content by using speech-act theory as the primary heuristic filter. Lastly, section three offers a concluding synthesis by maintaining that while human speech as a *verbum efficax* promotes human flourishing in all areas of life, human speech as a *verbum inefficax* fosters the atrophying of humanity's existence.

1 An earlier version of this journal article was published on January 14, 2018, as a blog post on https://blogs.bible.org/the-tongue-as-either-a-verbum-efficax-or-verbum-inefficax/.

Bible-based. Christ-centred. Spirit-led.

1. Introductory Thesis: Human Speech as a *Verbum Efficax*

In recent decades, specialists in biblical and theological studies have wrestled with the value of utilizing the principles and tools of speech-act theory to interpret the texts of the Judeo-Christian canon. The historical development and objective critique of this approach are deliberated thoroughly in the academic literature.[2]

To briefly summarize the above scholarship, the historical development of speech-act theory is part of the larger account of how human language and communication evolved over thousands of years. This progression is evident in the speeches and debates recorded in the writings of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece, as well as in the philosophical and religious texts penned during the medieval and Renaissance periods. In the modern era, specialists have advanced the field of study by using various scientific tools and linguistic methodologies, including speech-act theory, particularly with the goal of elucidating how language is processed and articulated.

Some of the potential methodological drawbacks in utilizing speech-act theory as a communicative framework include the following: ignoring the linguistic and situational contexts that influence speech acts; disregarding the limitations of this hypothetical approach in assessing nonverbal and symbolic forms of conveying thoughts; placing too much confidence on the presumed intention of the original speaker, which at times could be veiled or ambiguous; and overlooking the ways in which differing cultural norms and values might affect the interpretation of how language is used in all its diverse forms. Researchers attempt to overcome these sorts of limitations by adopting nuanced and interdisciplinary lines of inquiry. Indeed, as exemplified in the upcoming discussion, a convincing case can be made for speech-act theory offering viable ways and means of undertaking a canonical-literary reading of Scripture, such as James 3:1–12, that promises to be fresh and innovative.

As defined in the *SIL Glossary of Linguistic Terms* (Loos et al. 2003), a "speech act" involves a "speaker" who makes an "utterance." This includes articulating general declarations, as well as specific hypotheses, explanations, and warrants. Also included in a "speech act" is the "production of a particular effect in the addressee." Botha (1991a, 280) lists the following, representative, binary outcomes: felicitous/infelicitous; happy/unhappy; appropriate/inappropriate; effective/ineffective; and, successful/unsuccessful.

Moreover, speech-act theory places an emphasis on locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. Chan (2016, 21) provides a concise explanation of these three distinct facets or aspects, as follows: (1) "locution" is the "act *of* saying something"; (2) "illocution" is the "act *in* saying something"; and, (3) "perlocution" is the "act performed *by* saying something."[3] Yao (2017, 208) further develops these concepts, as follows: (1) the "locutionary act" entails "uttering" specific "noises" and/or "words," the latter especially within a particular context; (2) the "illocutionary act" governs the "manner in which a locution is being used"; and (3) the "perlocutionary act" brings about "certain effects or responses in the hearer" (e.g., "misleading, alarming, or convincing" someone).

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2 See the following divergent, representative, scholarly publications: Bartholomew (2001); Botha (1991a; 1991b; 2007); Briggs (2001); Buss (1988); Chan (2016); Childs (2005); Dively (2014); Du Plessis (1991); Norris (2011); Patte (1988); Thiselton (1992; 2001); Vanhoozer (1998; 2001); Ward (2002); Wolterstorff (1995; 2001); White (1988a; 1988b); Yao (2017).

3 Emphasis in the original.

The British philosopher and linguistic analyst, John Langshaw Austin, was instrumental in the development of speech-act theory. This is particularly so with the posthumous publication of his lectures titled, *How to Do Things with Words* (1975). Austin presented the latter at Harvard University in 1955. One of his protégés, John Searle, further conceptualized, synthesized, and organized Austin's concepts. Noteworthy is Searle's 1969 treatise, *Speech Acts*, in which he drew upon specific rules of language to offer a coherent framework for understanding the nature and significance of human utterances.

Austin and Searle were some of the scholars who provided the theoretical foundation for Oswald Bayer's application of speech-act theory to the proclamation of the gospel.[4] He (2003, 50–55; 2007, 126–134) observed that when viewed through the prism of speech-act theory, the good news that early Christians such as Paul and his associates heralded could be understood as a performative utterance, which conveys a specific promise or assurance.[5] Furthermore, the declaration of the gospel is efficacious, in that it actualizes for the first time a reality that did not previously exist.

To be precise, the Creator uses the heralding of the good news to initiate, establish, and preserve a relationship between himself and the unsaved. Indeed, the declaration of the gospel makes the presence of faith operative within addressees, whereas before, unbelief prevailed.[6] Bayer (2003, 258) observes that "God's Word is a *verbum efficax*, an efficacious Word. It never returns void but does what it says." Bayer (2007, 63) also notes that the "Scriptures are not simply printed words to be read off a page." More importantly, they are "life-giving words that stimulate our senses and emotions, our memory and imagination, our heart and desires."

The above assertions are supported by specialists exploring the nexus between speech-act theory and the exegesis of Scripture. For example, in addition to the proclaimed Word, Botha (1991a, 288) makes a credible argument for the written Word being regarded as a valid, efficacious form of speech act. He contends that "most, if not all, principles that are relevant to speech act theory" concerning spoken "narrative" are likewise applicable "when a literary work [such as Scripture] is read." Furthermore, Botha (1991b, 302) deduces that "some of the concepts of speech act theory" provide interpreters with a "versatile approach" that can "enhance" one's "reading" and "exegesis" of biblical texts. Similarly, Dively (2014, 6) advocates that "speech-act theory can be used alongside hermeneutical theories to help interpreters understand sacred texts."

The preceding outlook resonates with apostolic teaching, in which the written and proclaimed Word are both understood to be "alive and active" (Heb 4:12),[7] as well as "living and enduring" (1 Pet 1:23). In 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul declared that "all Scripture is inspired by God."[8] The Greek adjective rendered "inspired" means *God-breathed* (Spicq 1994, s.v. θεόπνευστος; Swanson 2001, s.v. θεόπνευστος). Because the Creator of the universe is the divine author of Scripture, its promulgation is eternally beneficial. For instance, God's Word is immeasurably useful for teaching sound doctrine and for showing people where they have strayed from the truth. The Bible is also efficacious for correcting sinful behavior and training people how to live in an upright manner. Verse 17 discloses that when Scripture

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4 See the scholarly publications referenced in fn. 2 for a detailed synopsis of specialists who have further refined speech-act theory in ways that move beyond the work of Austin and Searle.
5 What follows is an adaptation of observations made in Lioy (2016, 18, 89–90).
6 In this context, faith is not considered a work, but merely a response of the repentant sinner's broken heart to the saving activity of God.

7 Unless otherwise noted, all English renderings of Scripture are taken from the 2011 NIV.
8 Πᾶσα γραφὴ θεόπνευστος (NA[28]).

is consistently heeded, Jesus's followers are thoroughly prepared and furnished to undertake all sorts of beneficial acts for God's glory.

Furthermore, John 3:3–8 discloses that the Spirit is the author and agent of the "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17) that is produced within individual repentant, believing sinners. This observation recalls the creation narrative recorded in Genesis 1:1–2:3. Regardless of whether the focus is on the original act of creation or the new creation, against the backdrop of speech-act theory, both signify a *verbum efficax*. For instance, concerning the original act of creation, Hebrews 11:3 reveals that it was by "God's command" that the cosmos and its intervening ages were made.[9] Brueggemann (1997, 146) clarifies that the "imagery is of a powerful sovereign who utters a decree from the throne" and in doing so actualizes his edict.

In terms of the new creation, when it comes to the proclamation of the gospel, the Spirit uses the promise of salvation to bring about the redemptive reality being articulated. As Packer (2001, 1000) observes, previously unregenerate hearers are enabled to believe the good news about Jesus of Nazareth and experience the "inner" recreation of their "fallen human nature."[10] The implication is that through the heralding of the good news, the Father produces the new birth. He does so in such a way that he remains supreme, unconditional, and gracious in bringing it about. Likewise, the revivification signifies a momentous and extraordinary fresh start for repentant, believing sinners, who are transformed by the Spirit in their volitions, emotions, and actions (see Rom 12:1–2).

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9 God's superintendence of the cosmos did not cease with the initial act of creation. Rather, he continues to preserve, sustain, and uphold the universe in every moment of its existence, culminating in his creation of a "new heaven" (Rev 21:1) and a "new earth" at the end of the present age.
10 The remainder of the paragraph is a distillation and reformulation of information appearing in Packer's (2001) seminal article.

2. Subsequent Antithesis: Human Speech as a *Verbum Inefficax*

2.1 Overview

The observations in section one delineate the ways in which the declaration of the gospel is a speech act that produces an eternally worthwhile outcome; yet, what about the reverse? Expressed differently, what form of speech act might bring about a harmful result, namely, one that is a *verbum inefficax*? After all, as Bartholomew (2001, 151) clarifies, "language" is "capable of being misdirected," and Christians have an ethical "responsibility" of refusing to "participate in such misdirection."

James 3:1–12 provides needed insight concerning the above query. This choice of a passage to deliberate on speech-act theory is fitting, particularly given, as Thielman (2005, 505) observes, the epistle "says more about speech than any other single topic."[11] An examination of the pertinent literature did not surface any scholarly publications viewing this passage through the lens of speech-act theory. This especially includes how the latter might clarify the illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect of a *verbum inefficax*. Such a lacuna helps to incentivize the research undertaken in this journal article, along with the potential academic merit of the discourse appearing below.

Worth mentioning is Baker's *Personal Speech-Ethics in the Epistle of James* (1995). He particularly has in mind "ethics or morality as applied to interpersonal communication" (2).[12] While the author does not address

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11 Thielman (2005, 505) includes in his assessment of the letter from James, the author's "instructions on prayer, his criticism of boasting, and his blast against those who claim to have faith, but produce no deeds to back it up."
12 Baker (1995, 2) elaborates that "personal speech-ethics" deals with the "rights and wrongs of utterance." Moreover, the field of study involves the "process of human speech," along with its "relationship to thoughts and actions."

the issue of speech-act theory, his monograph provides useful contextual information from the literature of the ancient Near East, Tanakh, Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, Qumran communities, rabbinic works, and Greco-Roman treatises. In turn, Baker leverages insights gleaned from these diverse sources to discern what possibly "influenced" the "thoughts and assumptions" of the writer who penned the letter from James with respect to "speech-ethics" (1992, 4).

At this juncture, a disclaimer is in order. Questions about the provenance of the letter from James are ancillary to the investigation being undertaken below. The operating premise is that James was the half-brother of the Lord Jesus.[13] Prior to AD 48, James wrote his epistle to Jewish Christians living outside of Judea. Most likely, the author dealt with a widespread, burdensome circumstance they were experiencing, not a specific, calamitous incident. Their pastoral challenges included destitution, maltreatment, distrust and animosity between the wealthy and the impoverished, and misunderstandings about the interplay between saving faith and the good works it fosters.[14]

Watson (1993, 53–54) classifies James 3:1–12 as "deliberative rhetoric." Its characteristics include the intent to "advise and dissuade" an audience concerning a "specific course of action." Also, the "argumentation" is primarily comprised of "example," along with the "comparison of example." Furthermore, there is present the "sources" of the writer's argument (technically referred to as "deliberative *topoi*"), including what is deemed to be "advantageous, expedient, honorable, profitable, necessary, and their opposites." Moreover, the "basis" for the author's case (technically referred to as the *stasis*) is chiefly "one of quality," especially since the "nature or import" of an issue is under consideration.

Hartin (2003, 181–182) puts forward the following as the rhetorical structure of the "well-balanced argument" in James 3:1–2 dealing with the proper and improper uses of the tongue: (1) the theme (or *propositio*): exercise extreme caution in becoming teachers; (2) the reason (or *ratio*): everyone morally stumbles in what they say (v. 2); (3) the proof (or *rationis confirmatio*): the tongue is a potent force (vv. 3–5a); (4) the development or embellishment (or *exornatio*): the tongue is a vortex of devastation and death (vv. 5b–10); and, (5) the conclusion (*conplexio*): responsible and reckless forms of speech can neither occur simultaneously nor peacefully coexist (vv. 11–12).

Admittedly, Watson (1993, 64) proposes an alternative and possibly less serviceable structure for the rhetorical argumentation in James 3:1–12. The divisional differences with Hartin (2003) notwithstanding, Watson's (1993, 48) major claim continues to be pertinent, namely, that the passage remains "the author's own unified composition." It is "constructed according to a standard elaboration pattern for argumentation by Greco-Roman rhetorical works." Watson (49) lists the "four main divisions of the standard speech" as follows: (1) *exordium* (introduction); (2) *narratio* (statement of the facts of the case); (3) *probatio* (proofs of the proposition of the case); and, (4) *peroratio* (conclusion).

One need not adopt the organizational approaches above to affirm the potential value of considering the rhetorical structure of James 3:1–12.

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[13] Henceforth, the author of the epistle is taken to be male-gendered.

[14] The following are the representative secondary sources that have influenced the descriptive analysis of Jas 3:1–12: Adam (2013); Adamson (1976); Baker (1995); Bauckham (1999); Beale (2011); Blomberg and Kamell (2008); Brosend (2004); Burdick (1981); Calvin (1855); Carson (2007); Culpepper (1986); Davids (1982; 1989); Dibelius (1976); Fanning (1994); Goldingay (2016); Guthrie (1981); Hartin (2003); Hiebert (1970); Johnson (1995; 1998); Kilner (2010; 2015); Ladd (1997); Laws (1980); Lenski (1961); Lewis (1986); Loh and Hatton (1997); MacGorman (1986); Marshall (2004); Martin (1988); Mayor (1977); McKnight (2011); Moo (2000; 2002); Morris (1990); Motyer (1985); Osborne (2011); Richardson (1997); Ropes (1991); Schreiner (2013); Sleeper (1998); Strange (2010); Stulac (1993); Thielman (2005); Vlachos (2013); Wall (1997); Watson (1993); Williams (2001); Witherington (2007).

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In agreement with McKnight (2011, 267), these proposals highlight the "persuasive art" of the author's "rhetoric." The discourse that follows in this essay utilizes a more straightforward delineation of the passage: (1) being responsible teachers (vv. 1–2); (2) recognizing the tongue's destructive power (vv. 3–6); and, (3) acknowledging the tongue's recalcitrance (vv. 7–12). Where appropriate, references to speech-act theory are made, especially the contrast between human utterances as a *verbum efficax* versus a *verbum inefficax*. The treatise also factors in the illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect of these divergent forms of articulation.

2.2 Being responsible teachers (Jas 3:1–2)

By way of background, it is reasonable to surmise that there was substantial eagerness among Christians in the early church to teach. After all, based on the emphasis of this ministry in the New Testament,[15] it carried considerable rank and honor, like that of a rabbi in first-century AD ethnic, Jewish circles. Nonetheless, when considering James 3:1, readers discover that knowing divine truth is not necessarily the same as living it. Put another way, even though having a deep intellectual grasp of Scripture is commendable, it is quite another matter to practice what it teaches with unconditional kindness, integrity, and equity.[16]

Furthermore, as James reminded his fellow Christians, while it is noble to aspire to a teaching ministry, such believers are liable to receive a "stricter judgment" (CSB; or harsher condemnation). This means God would evaluate their lives more rigorously and stringently based on their increased awareness of the truth and influence over the lives of others.[17] Such a sobering observation is not intended to discourage teachers in the church who are gifted and called by God. After all, providing biblical instruction continues to be an essential part of carrying out Jesus's Great Commission to make disciples.[18] This observation recalls the discourse in section one, wherein the proclamation of the good news is categorized as a *verbum efficax*.

Moving beyond the preceding statements, the responsibility of teaching Scripture carries with it a degree of power and authority. Regrettably, this circumstance often attracts people whom God has not called to instruct others in his Word, but who crave the esteem and influence the position offers. It is within this pastoral context that the writer broadened his observations to encompass all believers, particularly as he made incisive observations about toxic forms of human speech that prove to be a *verbum inefficax*.[19]

For instance, a primary way to communicate—including the proclamation of God's Word—is by means of the tongue. The downside is that hurtful remarks can greatly offend others, who in turn might refuse to offer their forgiveness. Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman (1998) clarify that

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15 See Acts 13:1; Rom 12:7; 1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11; 2 Tim 2:2; 1 Pet 4:11; also Did 13:1–2; 15:1–2.
16 Paul, in 1 Cor 8:1, repeated a common slogan of his day, "We all possess knowledge." His trenchant response was that while "knowledge puffs up," Christlike "love builds up." Other portions of the New Testament draw attention to the problem within the early church of congregations being plagued by the presence of ill-suited, incompetent, and heretical teachers. See Acts 15:24; 1 Tim 1:6–7; 6:3; 2 Tim 4:3; 2 Pet 2:1; 1 John 3:7; Jude 1:4.

17 See Matt 5:19; 12:36; 18:6; Acts 20:25–27; Jas 2:12.
18 See Matt 28:19–20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46–47; Acts 1:8.
19 Along with the letter from James, the Hebrew sacred writings cautioned against iniquitous forms of human speech. Isaiah 6:5–6 is a case in point. The prophet confessed that he and his fellow citizens were guilty of "unclean lips." While this possibly included uttering vulgar language, most likely Isaiah had something else in mind. The people's lips were instruments of religious hypocrisy and of false professions of faith in God. The prophet recognized his need for his lips to be purified so that he could praise the Lord with the seraphs and declare God's message to the people. The literature of Second Temple Judaism also censured various forms of verbal transgressions, such as being deceitful, talking impulsively, slandering others, gossiping, and quarreling. See Sir 5:11–6:1; 19:4–17; 28:11–26.

in biblical literature, there are "four main categories" for the "symbolic" use of the tongue, as follows: (1) the tongue can denote the "language" being spoken; (2) the tongue frequently "points to an individual utterance"; (3) on occasion, the tongue designates the "shape of an object"; and, (4) the tongue signifies "nonverbal messages." The second use is the most pertinent to the analysis being undertaken here.

James 3:2 acknowledges that the human struggle with sin plagues everyone—including believers—in numerous, varied, and ongoing ways.[20] Despite that, the tongue is the part of the body that reveals a person's depraved, wayward tendencies most clearly. Not even those who teach Scripture are exempt from this reality. After all, as Jesus declared in Matthew 15:18–19, human speech is the gateway from the inner to the outer world. The words a person uses disclose to others what is inside of oneself.[21] While it is true that some individuals talk more than others, the issue here is not how *much* they say, but rather the *kind* of statements that are uttered and the *tone* that characterizes what is spoken.

The Greek verb translated "stumble" (πταίω; Jas 3:2) refers to intentional ethical missteps, not simply inadvertent human error (Balz and Schneider 1990, s.v. πταίω; Schmidt 1964, s.v. πταίω). The literary context indicates that much of this stumbling occurs because of destructive forms of communication (including lying, slander, and gossip, to name a few unsavory examples). The writer disclosed that if people could keep a tight rein on their tongue (at least hypothetically), they likewise could restrain their entire body. Indeed, they would be perfectly self-controlled.

Previously, in 1:26, the writer contended that those who fail to bridle their tongues are self-deceived when it comes to their assertions of being "religious" (that is, devout or pious).

The Greek adjective rendered *perfect* (LEB; τέλειος; 3:2) denotes those who are fully developed in a moral sense and meet the highest ethical standards in their conduct (Silva 2014, s.v. τέλειος; Swanson 2001, s.v. τέλειος).[22] The emphasis is on the maturity of one's behavior. The idea is that believers who never sin with their tongues probably show themselves flawlessly developed in other areas of their lives. Regardless of how accurate one's personal assessment is in this area of conduct, the unvarnished truth is that there can be no spiritual maturity while the tongue remains untamed and out of control.

2.3 Recognizing the tongue's destructive power (Jas 3:3–6)

Perhaps within the faith communities to which the letter from James was originally directed, some believers downplayed the importance of controlling their speech. If so, this explains why, in James 3:3–4,[23] the writer

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22 See also Matt 5:48.

23 Martin (1988) notes a textual discrepancy in Jas 3:3. The most "widely supported" Greek manuscripts read εἰ δὲ ("and if"; see Westcott; NA²⁷; NA²⁸; SBLGNT; NASB; EHV; ESV; LEB; NRSV; NIV; NET; CSB; NLT). A less likely reading is ἰδού ("behold"; see TR1881; KJV; NKJV), particularly due to the likelihood of "scribal harmonizing" with ἰδού in vv. 4 and 5. Also see Metzger (1994).

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20 See 1 Kgs 8:46; Job 4:17–19; Prov 20:9; Eccl 7:20; 4 Ezra 8:35; Sir 19:16; 1 John 1:8.

21 The Synoptic Gospels record Jesus's teaching that the words people speak reflect what is truly in their innermost being. See Matt 12:33–37; Mark 7:15–23; Luke 6:43–45. On the symbolic import of the heart in biblical literature, see Lower (2009) and Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman (1998).

offered two illustrations of common practices in Greco-Roman society to demonstrate how a small object, such as the human tongue, can positively or negatively control the destiny of a much larger entity.[24]

First, a light metal bar[25] placed in the mouth of a draft horse[26] allows the rider to dictate where the huge animal travels.[27] Second, a boat's rudder[28] determines the course of its many-times-larger sailing vessel. The pilot or helmsman steering the ship[29] needs only to change the direction of the rudder and, despite fierce winds, can keep the vessel on course.

Verse 5 applies the preceding two illustrations to the tongue by stating that even though it is a small member of the human body, it can produce a great deal of good or evil. When viewed through the lens of speech-act theory, this state of affairs would be characterized as either a *verbum efficax* or *verbum inefficax*. In the second case, despite the tongue's exaggerated claims, it has the power to wreak unimaginable havoc on the lives of its victims.

The second half of verse 5 introduces a third illustration involving a tiny flame. On the one hand, it can often be extinguished quickly with little thought and effort; yet, on the other hand, a seemingly harmless spark can reduce acres of forest to charred rubble.[30] Verse 6 advances the thought by comparing the tongue to an inferno,[31] since a few ill-chosen words can do a vast amount of damage in a short length of time.[32] Moreover, as the epitome of a *verbum inefficax*, the tongue is comparable to an incendiary device that engulfs an individual's whole life.

Verse 6 literally refers to the "tongue" as the "world of iniquity."[33] Wall (1997, 169) explains that within the letter from James, the Greek noun rendered *world* (κόσμος) denotes the locus of "anti-God values and sentiments." For this reason, the author exhorted Christians to resist the temptation of being stained and corrupted by the pagan beliefs, values, and priorities embraced by the unsaved (1:27). For instance, their ethical system lauds material wealth and maligns poverty (2:5). Moreover, "friendship

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24 Moo (2002, 104) states that the letter from James drew upon a "widespread series of images from his culture." Literary correspondences can be found in the writings of Aristotle, Philo, and Plutarch (See the citations in Ropes 1991, 231). Johnson (1998, 204) clarifies that the "Hellenistic moralists" of the day were "fundamentally sanguine" concerning humankind's ability to align "speech" with "reason and virtue." The epistle's author, however, was considerably "more pessimistic in his evaluation." By espousing this view, he ensured his readers fully grasped the destructive potential latent in the tongue. For an in-depth comparison of James with other Greco-Roman and Judaic texts, see Baker (1995); Strange (2010).
25 Possibly made from iron; see Yamauchi (2016).
26 Perhaps weighing between 1,000 and 2,000 pounds; see Cansdale (2009a).
27 Psa 39:1 records David's decision to place a "muzzle" over his "mouth" as a way to prevent him from sinning with his "tongue," especially while in the "presence" of the "wicked."
28 The rudder would have been a wooden or metal blade about the size of a person's arm that was fastened in a perpendicular position to the stern of the ship; see Branch and Schoville (2016).
29 The vessel would have been up to 150 feet in length; see Beck (2011).

30 Moo (2000, 155) draws attention to an alternative interpretation in Jas 3:5, namely, that the author's reference might be to the "brush" typically carpeting "many Palestinian hills." In the "dry Mediterranean climate," the parched vegetation could "easily and disastrously burst into flames." For a selective list of references in ancient literature wherein the occurrence of forest fires is used for illustrative purposes in ethical discussions, see Ropes (1991, 232–233).
31 See Prov 16:27, which likens the slanderous remarks uttered by human "lips" to a "scorching fire." Similarly, Psalms of Solomon 12:2–3 associates the "lying tongue" of the "wicked" with a "fire that burns." Likewise, Sir 28:22 equates a malicious tongue with "flames" that burn their victims.
32 In the ancient world, people used buckets, axes, and other tools to prevent, thwart, and extinguish fires; yet, despite their vigilant efforts, they were extremely limited in what they could accomplish. Moreover, once the flames became uncontrollable, they could spread quickly throughout a town filled with dry, wooden structures; see Funderburk (2009); Van Broekhoven (1982).
33 Loh and Hatton (1997) reiterate the consensus view among specialists that the syntax and imagery in James 3:6 are "extremely ambiguous and difficult to understand." In turn, Davids (1982, 141–144) offers a cogent and clear delineation of the various approaches commentators have used to understand the precise meaning of the verse. Amid all the scholarly deliberations and disagreements, his sage conclusion is that the "author has piled up stock phrases and expressions" that are best "taken unidiomatically." As with "modern sermons," the "mixture of metaphors and grammar" would have left an indelible impression on the "original readers with rhetorical clarity."

with the world" (4:4) not only results in "hostility toward God" (EHV), but also becoming his adversary. Correspondingly, 1 John 2:15–17 admonishes believers to neither "love the world" nor whatever the "world" offers. The latter includes the depraved appetites of sinful people, the sensual desires of their eyes, and their bragging about what they have and do.

James 3:6 is pungent in declaring that human speech represents the source and sum of wickedness committed by the heathen in society.[34] Indeed, the tongue signifies the totality of unrighteousness that pagan, fallen individuals can achieve. This truth is evident when the instrument of articulation operates unchecked, particularly as it spews forth a torrent of invectives that spiritually defiles a person's entire being. Even worse, the tongue sets ablaze the complete arc of temporal and eternal existence. Human speech exerts such a destructive force over the cycle of life—in the words of Hartin (2003, 177), "from the cradle to the grave"—because it is inflamed by hell's fiery abyss.

Hell renders the Greek noun γέεννα.[35] It is a transliteration and simplification of the Hebrew phrase, גֵּיא בֶן־הִנֹּם, which refers to the Valley of Hinnom. The latter was the lower area of land along the southwest corner of Jerusalem. The valley formed part of the dividing line between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The locale is also where Ahaz and Manasseh, two of Judah's most notorious kings, offered their sons in fiery sacrifice to the Ammonite god, Molech.[36] In the intertestamental period Jewish apocalyptic writers first called the Valley of Hinnom the gateway to hell, and later

referred to it as hell itself.[37] In first-century AD Jerusalem, inhabitants continuously used the area to dump and burn garbage and bodily waste, so that smoke could be seen rising from it continually.

Considering the above explanatory information, γέεννα provides an apt illustration of everlasting torment. Also, James 3:6, in referring to hell, draws attention to forms of human speech that constitute the most unsavory exemplars of *verbum inefficax*. For instance, when the tongue is left uncontrolled, it becomes a tool for vice, rather than virtue. Indeed, under the influence of Satan and his demonic cohorts, people say things that are destructive in nature.

2.4 Acknowledging the tongue's recalcitrance (Jas 3:7–12)

In James 3:7–12, the writer compared the tongue to an untamed (and possibly ritually unclean) animal. Presumably, this rhetorical decision produced a strong visceral response in his Jewish-minded readers. After all, they would have found any comparison between people and other aspects of creation—whether animate or inanimate—to be demeaning,[38] especially since humanity was regarded as the apex of everything God brought into existence.[39]

The writer noted that throughout their history, people across the globe subdued various species of creatures. Even in his day, clever individuals figured out ways to domesticate wild beasts of the forest and birds in the

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34 Gal 5:19–21 catalogs a representative list of vices performed by human beings in their sinful state, and fittingly constitutes the "whole world of wickedness" (NLT) associated with the tongue in Jas 3:6.

35 The following are the representative secondary sources that have influenced the discussion about the Greek noun, γέεννα: Jeremias (1964); Louw and Nida (1989); Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman (1998); Silva (2014).

36 See Josh 15:8; 18:16; 2 Kgs 23:10; 2 Chr 33:6; Jer 7:31–32; 19:5–7; 32:35.

37 See 1 Enoch 54:1; 56:3.

38 See 1 Enoch 85–90; Acts 10:9–16; 11:5–10; Jude 1:12–13.

39 See the creation narrative recorded in Gen 1:1–2:3.

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sky, along with reptiles and sea creatures.[40] Humanity's preceding laudatory accomplishments stood in sharp contrast with their inability to subdue the tongue in acts of locution.

During their time on earth as God's vice-regents, people were completely unsuccessful in taming their utterances. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, they became promulgators of what speech-act theory labels as a *verbum inefficax*. The writer indicated that to subdue the tongue, nothing less than God's power was required. So, on the one hand, humankind succeeded in carrying out the divine mandate to rule over virtually every aspect of creation;[41] yet, on the other hand, the instrument of communication remained feral. Likewise, it showed no sign of ever capitulating to human control.[42]

James 3:8 bluntly states the reason for humanity's abysmal failure rate. Their instrument of speech is not only evil, but also *restless*.[43] The Greek adjective translated *restless* (ἀκατάστατος) suggests a staggering, unsteady, and disorderly form of wickedness.[44] Loh and Hatton (1997) put forward the image of a "caged beast" that paces "back and forth" and searches for an "opportunity to break out." The implication is that the tongue, as the

exemplar of a *verbum inefficax*, could pounce at any time, without warning or rational cause, and with the outcome being chaos and confusion.[45]

The Greek phrase rendered, "full of deadly poison" (μεστὴ ἰοῦ θανατηφόρου), recalls Psalm 140:3.[46] The poet compared the speech of his antagonists to the sharp, fatal bite of a viper. Though this snake is diminutive, it has a particularly mean disposition. It attacks swiftly and holds fast to its victim with lethal tenacity. Correspondingly, like a venomous snake concealed in the bush beside a trail, the tongue is loaded with life-threatening toxins and poised to strike.[47]

The above comparison reinforces the notion that what the tongue utters can constitute a form of speech act that brings about a noxious result, namely, one that is *verbum inefficax*. Human articulation especially shows its devastating nature by its erratic and contradictory behavior. For example, as suggested by Blomberg and Kamell (2008, 161), during a corporate worship service believers might use their mouths to praise their "Lord and Father" (Jas 3:9).[48] Then, in a different setting, they might deploy

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40 Ancient sacred Jewish and Christian texts typically placed earth's creatures into four broad categories of speciation; see Gen 1:26; 9:2; Deut 4:17–18; 1 Enoch 7:5; Acts 10:12; 11:6.

41 See Gen 1:26; 9:2; Ps 8:6–8. For a disquisition of the creation or cultural mandate, especially from a missional perspective, see Bosch (2011); Crouch (2013); Hastings (2012).

42 See Prov 10:20; 12:18; 13:3; 15:2, 4; 21:3; 31:36; Sir 14:1; 19:5–6; 25:8; Lev. Rab. 16; Deut. Rab. 5:10.

43 Davids (1982, 144–145) explains that the Greek text of Jas 3:8 contains a minor textual discrepancy. The most highly regarded manuscripts use the adjective, ἀκατάστατον (restless; see Westcott; NA27; NA28; SBLGNT; NASB; EHV; ESV; LEB; NRSV; NIV; NET; CSB; NLT). However, a larger number of lesser regarded manuscripts use the variant reading, ἀκατασχετόν (uncontrollable; see TR1881; KJV; NKJV). Also see Metzger (1994).

44 For details on this lexeme, see Danker (2000), Oepke (1964), and Souter (1917).

45 Not surprisingly, Jas 1:19 admonishes Jesus's followers to "be quick to listen" and "slow to speak."

46 Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman (1998) additionally list Pss 57:4, 64:3, and Jer 9:8 as examples of the tongue being used as a "weapon for harm." Furthermore, they draw attention to Prov 18:21, which describes the tongue as having the "power" to either foster "life" or bring about "death."

47 For a consideration of the snake as a variegated metaphor in the Judeo-Christian canon, see Beck (2011); Cansdale (2009b).

48 As identified by Dibelius (1976, 202–203). See the formulaic, liturgical language in the following Jewish and Christian texts: 1 Chron 29:10; Pss 28:6; 31:21; 103:1–2; Isa 63:16; 1 Enoch 22:14; 48:10; 61:7; 63:2; 81:3; 84:2; Sir 23:1, 4; Tob 3:11; Rom 9:5; 2 Cor 1:3; Eph 1:3; 1 Pet 1:3. Mayor (1977, 121) elucidates that aside from Jas 3:9, the Greek phrase rendered "Lord and Father" (κύριον καὶ πατέρα) is found nowhere else in New Testament. Also, as Hiebert (1970, 222) notes, the verse contains a minor textual discrepancy. Numerous later manuscripts use the noun, θεόν (God), which in turn influenced several translations of the verse (see TR1881; KJV; NKJV). Even so, the most highly regarded earlier manuscripts use the noun, κύριον (Lord), which is also attested in differing translations of the same verse (see Westcott; NA27; NA28; SBLGNT; NASB; EHV; ESV; LEB; NRSV; NIV; NET; CSB; NLT). Also see Metzger (1994).

their tongues to pronounce a curse (or invoke adversity and sorrow) on their fellow human beings.[49] Witherington (2007, 497) comments that in ancient times, people regarded words as being "more than the mere audible pronunciation" of specific terms. The words people uttered had "inherent power," which in turn could impact "what they spoke."

The activity of praising God is commendable and constructive, whereas the activity of cursing people is reprehensible and destructive. The enormity of the preceding double-minded hypocrisy[50] is intensified by the realization that the same Creator made every person in his likeness. Admittedly, the consensus theological view is that within fallen humanity, the image of God has been defaced through sin.[51] Nonetheless, people still bear the divine *likeness* to some degree,[52] and this reality sets them apart from the rest of earth's creatures.[53] So, to call down misfortune on one's fellow human beings is tantamount to cursing their sovereign Lord.[54]

Carson (2007, 1006) comments that such a self-centered and self-serving attitude is a "form of idolatry." Understandably, then, in verse 10, the author despaired that a person's mouth could pronounce blessings (that is, a *verbum efficax*) and spout expletives (that is, a *verbum inefficax*) in almost the same breath.[55] Certainly, out of a pastoral concern for his readers (to whom he appealed as his colleagues in the faith), he declared that such inconsistency was unacceptable for Jesus's followers to tolerate.[56] In the parlance of speech-act theory, believers honor their Redeemer when their utterances are spiritually efficacious rather than inefficacious.

To illustrate his point, the writer used two rhetorical questions[57] involving phenomena in the physical world.[58] Specifically, the groundwater flowing abundantly from the opening of a spring in the Jordan Valley was either fresh or brackish, not delectable one moment and acrid shortly thereafter (v. 11). Likewise, one would not expect to draw fresh water out of a pond suffused with salt (v. 12).[59] Moreover, the fig trees growing throughout the eastern Mediterranean never produced a crop of olives.

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49 For a deliberation of the lexical meaning and theological nuances of the Greek verb, καταράομαι (curse), see Büchsel (1964); Mangum and Brown (2014); Silva (2014). For the contribution that speech-act theory could potentially make in the analysis of biblical texts containing blessings and curses, see Briggs (2001, 20–21, 184–185); Chan (2016, 86–87, 93, 117, 151, 170, 172, 193, 195, 199–201, 206–207, 224, 229, 237); Childs (2005, 389); Hancher (1988, 28–29); Patte (1988, 9–10); White (1988a, 21); Wolterstorff (1995:8, 185, 212, 217).
50 See Pss 62:4; 119:13; Lam 3:38; Sir 5:13–15; 28:12; Jas 1:8; Did. 2:4.
51 The traditional doctrinal position is that humans intrinsically possess the *imago Dei* (especially in terms of rulership and representation), and that in a post-Fall world overrun with sin, the image of God has been marred, though not eradicated. Kilner (2010; 2015) dissents from this view, particularly that the *imago Dei* has in any manner been "damaged," "partly lost," and/or "compromised" (2010, 602–603; 2015, 174). Even so, he concedes that he is making an argument based on silence (2010, 615; 2015, 183): "Admittedly, the Bible does not contain an explicit affirmation that the image of God has *not* been damaged" (emphasis in the original). For an evenhanded critique of Kilner's reasoning and rationale for his position, see Franklin (2017).
52 See Gen 1:26–27; 5:1–2; 9:6; 2 Enoch 44:1; 2 Esd 8:44; Wis 2:23; Gen. Rab. 24:7–8; 1 Cor 11:7.
53 For differing views regarding the interpretive nuances connected with the phrase, *image of God* as used in Scripture, see Longman (2017); Middleton (2017); Walton (2015).
54 See an analogous point made in Gen. Rab. 24:7, as part of a rabbinical interpretation of Gen 5:1 (Neusner 2001, 75).

55 See the admonitions in Sir 6:1; 28:13; and Testament of Benjamin 6:5–6, against using the tongue to make hypocritical, contradictory statements.
56 Vlachos (2013, 116) explains that the use of χρή (it ought), rather than δεῖ (it is necessary), in Jas 3:10, "bears a stronger sense here." The rhetorical force of the interjection is fittingly captured by the NLT with "this is not right!"
57 According to Lenski (1961, 612), the two rhetorical questions presumed corresponding, vigorous, negative responses.
58 In Matt 7:15–19, Jesus pointed out distinctions found in the natural world to stress the importance of differentiating between true and false prophets. See also Matt 12:33–35; Luke 6:43–45.
59 Brannon (2014) draws attention to a textual discrepancy in Jas 3:12. The earliest, most reliable Greek manuscripts read, "neither can a saltwater spring produce fresh water" (οὔτε ἀλυκὸν γλυκὺ ποιῆσαι ὕδωρ; see Westcott; NA27; NA28; SBLGNT; NASB; EHV; ESV; LEB; NRSV; NIV; NET; CSB; NLT). In contrast, later, less reliable Greek manuscripts read, "thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh" (οὕτως οὐδεμια πηγὴ ἀλυκὸν καὶ γλυκὺ ποιῆσαι ὕδωρ; see TR1881; KJV; NKJV). The discrepancy notwithstanding, the essential meaning of the verse is equivalent, namely, that two completely dissimilar types of water (salt and fresh) cannot originate from the same source.

Similarly, grape vines planted on Judea's hillsides did not yield a batch of figs. Each kind of plant—regardless of whether it was a tree, shrub, or herb[60]—bore only their naturally-occurring harvests.

Like verse 10, the writer in verse 12 referred to his readers as his Christian friends. In this way, he retained their attention, especially as he implored them to recognize the sharp contrast between how entities in creation and the tongue normally operate. In brief, human speech has the potential to be perverse. As verses 13 through 16 reveal, apart from God's wisdom, believers are helpless to counter the destructive effects of their utterances, whether in their relationship with God or other people. The only viable choice, then, is for Jesus's followers to shun all forms of destructive communication.

3. Concluding Synthesis: Opting for Human Speech as a *Verbum Efficax*, Not a *Verbum Inefficax*

The major premise of this journal article is that human speech is either categorized as a *verbum efficax* or a *verbum inefficax*. Put differently, the tongue utters words that are alternately efficacious or inefficacious. The first option promotes human flourishing in all areas of life, whereas the second option fosters the atrophying of humanity's existence.

Speech-act theory provides the philosophical basis for the preceding delineations. General declarations, along with particular explanations, warrants, and hypotheses, fall under the rubric of being utterances made by people. When considering the illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect of these articulations, they can either be helpful or harmful, as well as beneficial or deleterious.

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[60] These referents are just a few representative categories. For the motif of plants used in Scripture, see Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman (1998); Shewell-Cooper (2009); Tucker (2016).

The creation narrative in Genesis 1:1–2:3 is a grand example of a *verbum efficax*. At the dawn of time, the Triune God commanded the entire universe into existence. Another case in point would be the Spirit of God making believers new creations when they hear the proclamation of the gospel. Whereas before the announcement of the good news, there was spiritual death, after the utterance of the εὐαγγέλιον (gospel), there is the manifestation of faith and with it the revivification of one's soul.

The extended discourse in James 3:1–12 provides an incisive *exposé* of a *verbum inefficax*. The teaching ministry of God's Word forms the gateway to the writer's diatribe against harmful, toxic forms of human speech. He was unsparing in spotlighting the truth that those who fancy themselves as dispensers of divine truth face the prospect of being judged more strictly by the Creator for the motivation, nature, scope, and outcomes of their teaching ministries.

Next, the writer broadened the horizon of his critique against all forms of *verbum inefficax*, as centered in the tongue. On one level, it declares pretentious aspirations; yet, on another level, its utterances lead to death and destruction. Human speech is comparable to a tiny spark that sets ablaze an entire forest. Ultimately, idolatry, immorality, and injustice are the ingredients that spew forth from this noxious hellstew.

In this way the tongue is the archetype of a *verbum inefficax*. From an individual point of view, human speech has the ability to spiritually sully a person's entire body. Moreover, from an interpersonal perspective, the instrument of articulation can exert a destructive force that engulfs human communities, from those that only involve a few people to those that encompass entire nation-states.

The writer convincingly argued that no human power can exercise lasting control over the tongue. Indeed, as the embodiment of a *verbum inefficax*, thoughtless and malicious forms of speech lay waste to lives,

reputations, and careers like a fire consuming a forest, leaving it a charred, smoldering wasteland.

There is, then, a dynamic tension between utterances that are either a *verbum efficax* or a *verbum inefficax*. Conveyed differently, the tongue can alternately bless and curse, as well as build up and tear down. The potential of this small member of a person's body for good is seemingly limitless, and so is its power for evil. The proverbial Jekyll and Hyde nature of human speech is unparalleled in the natural world.

To recap, the tongue, as a *verbum inefficax*, is frightening in its power, destructive in its capacity, and unpredictable in its character. Taming the tongue is a discipline rarely achieved, even by Jesus's followers. Indeed, apart from the Savior's grace and the Spirit's empowering presence,[61] even believers are helpless to counter the devastating effects of their speech in their relationships with God and other people. For this reason, the admonition in 1 Peter 3:10 is well worth considering. Specifically, believers who want their God-given existence to be characterized by productivity and joy must restrain their "tongue" from speaking "evil" and preempt their "lips from uttering deceit" (NET). Even better is when the instrument of human speech utters praises to the Creator.[62]

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61 Especially through the ministry of Word and sacrament.
62 See Pss 51:14; 126:2; Acts 10:46.

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