


# Filling the Empty: An Unnoticed Pun in James 2.20-23

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## Abstract

The style of James's epistle receives much acclaim. Among other techniques like alliteration and rhythm, James enjoys a play on words. I propose that James puns on the concept of "filling" with three words in Jas 2.20-23: κενέ ("empty," v. 20), ἐτελειώθη ("be complete," v. 22), and ἐπληρώθη ("be fulfilled," v. 23), to the effect that an "empty" person is told to learn from the "filled out" faith of Abraham whose willingness to sacrifice Isaac "fulfilled" the earlier pronouncement about his righteousness. This suggestion builds on discussions concerning the relationship between vv. 20, 22, and vv. 22-23. It also draws out often neglected connotations of τελειόω. This wordplay fits into a wider "completion" theme in James and may even have been picked up by the Shepherd of Hermas and the Didache.

## Keywords

James 2, pun, κενός, τελειόω, πληρώω, Shepherd of Hermas, Didache

The style of James's epistle receives much acclaim. It is "excellent Greek" (Hartin 2009, 22) that is "fluent and elegant" (Martin 1988, lxx) with "literary flourishes" (Guthrie 2006, 200). Sophie Laws (1980, 5) speaks of "a certain feeling for cadence and an especial fondness for alliteration," while James Ropes (1916, 24) notes its "vivacity, simple directness, and general attractiveness and effectiveness." John Painter (2012, 39) judges James to be "more polished Greek than almost any other NT work," Pheme Perkins (1995, 84) describes the language as "careful" and "well-schooled," and

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Dale Allison (2013, 56) finds “hints that our author had more than a Jewish education” because of the “not unaccomplished” language. Perhaps the most detailed accounting of James’s rhetoric comes in Joseph Mayor’s celebrated commentary (1910, ccvi–cclix). He summarizes, “If we are asked to characterize in a few words the more general qualities of St. James’ style, as they impress themselves on the attentive reader, perhaps these would be best summed up in the terms, energy, vivacity, and, as conducive to both, vividness of representation” (cclvii).

Among other techniques, such as alliteration and rhythm, James enjoys a play on words. Sometimes this is in the form of paronomasia, the repetition of a word or its root in a short span of text, for example, the several instances of ἔργα “works” in various cases, alongside ἀργή “un-working” and συνήργει “was working with” in 2.20-22 (many other examples can be found in Mayor 1910, ccl–cclii). Other times, the effect is drawn from a common conceptual domain, such as κρίσις “judgment” with ἀνέλεος “unmerciful” and ἔλεος “mercy” in 2.13 (Johnson 1995, 8). Or again, James uses “catchwords” as a transition device to connect otherwise disparate sections of discourse. An example of this comes at a seam between two subsections in 1.12-13, which makes a pun on πειρασμόν in the neutral sense of “trial” with three forms of πειράζω in the negative sense of “to tempt” and ἀπειράστος as “not liable to temptation” (Johnson 1995, 8). The former can be turned to the positive end of “receiv[ing] the crown of life that the Lord has promised” (v. 12), while the latter is an activity hardly befitting of God (v. 13).

Given his fondness for winsome expression, I propose that James puns on the concept of “filling” with three words in Jas 2.20-23: κενέ (“empty,” v. 20), ἐτελειώθη (“be complete,” v. 22), and ἐπληρώθη (“be fulfilled,” v. 23). (It is a “pun” in the sense that the three words can be understood in two ways: Each has an evident meaning that contributes to the flow of the passage, but they also align in their etymological sense of “filling,” which lends memorability, if not humor, to the wording.) This complements the “working” paronomasia in the same passage (noted above). Adapting NRSV (the translation used unless otherwise noted) to capture both series yields the following (emphasis mine in all Scripture quotations):

Do you want to be shown, you *empty* [κενέ] person, that faith apart from *works* [ἔργων] is *un-working* [ἀργή]? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by *works* [ἔργων] when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was *working along with* [συνήργει] his *works* [ἔργοις], and faith *was filled out* [ἐτελειώθη] by the *works* [ἔργων]. Thus the scripture *was fulfilled* [ἐπληρώθη] that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God.

The possibility of a play on “filling” is obscured in most translations, since they are reticent to translate κενέ as “empty” (except NET; cf. KJV,

“vain”) and may prefer “was perfected” for ἐτελειώθη. So, for example, NASB translates the passage this way:

But are you willing to recognize, you *foolish* fellow, that faith without works is useless? . . . You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith *was perfected*; and the Scripture *was fulfilled*.

Several idiomatic translations erase “filling” language even from ἐπληρώθη. CEV renders the passage thus:

Does some *stupid* person want proof that faith without deeds is useless? . . . Now you see how Abraham’s faith and deeds worked together. He *proved that* his faith *was real* by what he did. This is what the Scriptures *mean*.

Insofar as I know, the translation closest to mine is the messianic-Jewish TLV, which has “you empty person,” “was made complete,” and “was fulfilled,” but the chosen wording may be happenstance rather than intent to capture a pun. In any case, given the translations readily available, ordinary English-speakers would little sense the playfulness of James’s wording in Jas 2.20-23.

## Linking three words and two discussions

My understanding of the passage links two discussions already underway, as well as filling out neglected lexical connotations of ἐτελειώθη.

**Verses 20, 22.** Commentators regularly discuss what James’s interlocutor in v. 20 lacks. Although some translate κενός directly as “empty” (Hartin 2009, 149), it is more commonly taken as “empty-headed” (Martin 1988, 76), “senseless” (McKnight 2011, 243), or “foolish” (Davids 1982, 126), usually indicating “that the intellectual failure has moral bases or implications” (Moo 2000, 132). The person might have a faith that is deficient of works specifically. In Dan McCartney’s (2009, 161) words, “The one who claims to separate faith and works is an ‘empty human’ because he or she has an empty faith.”

Especially if the absence in v. 20 concerns faith without works, there is a natural bridge to τελειώω in v. 22. The translational divide between “to complete” and “to perfect” is more a matter of English usage rather than a debate about Greek meaning. The sense in James concerns “maturity, fruition, or completion” (McCartney 2009, 169), and this is widely granted, including by those who do not associate κενός with lack of belief (e.g., Metzner 2017, 151–52, 156). Abraham’s previously budding faith (Gen 15.6, in v. 23) reaches its full fruit only with the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22, in v. 21). Faith “was completed” is to be preferred simply to avoid confusion, lest an English

speaker hear “was perfected” as though it meant “was purged of errors.” The language of “completing” narrows the idea properly.

*Connotations of ἐτελειώθη.* The careful reader will have noticed, however, that my rendering above was not “was completed.” Rather, I translate ἐτελειώθη as “was filled out.” This is not simply an artificial device to draw out a pun, but native to the meaning of τελειώω. It is true that the τελ- root, particularly in its τελ- and τελευ- forms, can indicate the “end” or “goal”—a linear metaphor, as of a path. Hence 2 Tim 4.7 records, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished [τετέλεκα] the race, I have kept the faith.” But that does not exhaust the conceptual domain of the root.

Words with the τελει- form especially can indicate “fullness” or “maturity”—a metaphor of volume. Hebrews 5.13-14 (and similarly, 1 Cor 14.20) contrasts milk for infants with solid food “for the mature” (τελείων), and the following verse (6.1) exhorts the audience to press on from elementary teachings toward maturity (ἐπὶ τὴν τελειότητα). This passage is in line with wider Greek writings, in which “mature” (τέλειος) can be biological, for fully grown humans, animals, or plants; or metaphorical, for the fully developed, virtuous self. In the Septuagint τέλειος regularly indicates “whole” or “undivided” (translating מְלֵא or מְמֵן), as of the heart, and the phrase τελειώω τὰς χεῖράς τιος (Exod 29.9, 29, 33, 35; Lev 8.33; 16.32; Num 3.3) is equivalent to πληρώω τὰς χεῖράς τιος, the latter preferred outside the Pentateuch (e.g., Sir 45.15; Delling 1972, 72, 80–81; also Delling 1968, 287). Both mean, on a literal level, “to fill the hands,” even if the sense is “to consecrate.” Delling (1972, 82) thus translates ἐτελειώθη in Jas 2.22 as “came to fulness,” “became complete,” and Schippers (1986, 63) takes it to mean “to become whole.” (The foregoing summarizes examples and analysis in BDAG, 995–99; Delling 1972, 49–87; Schippers 1986, 59–66, lightly revised in Silva 2014, 470–80.)

Thus, there is no strain in translating the wordplay between κενέ (v. 20) and ἐτελειώθη (v. 22) as “empty” and “was filled out.”

*Verses 22-23.* Perhaps because ἐπληρώθη ἡ γραφή “Scripture was fulfilled” is a stock introduction to a quotation in early Christian literature, the use of that phrase in Jas 2.23 has never (so far as I am aware) been linked to “empty” in v. 20, despite the common analogy. It has been compared to ἐτελειώθη in v. 22, but only rarely. Martin Dibelius (1976, 163) explicitly rejects the possibility:

One must avoid the mistake of closely connecting the expression “and it was fulfilled” (καὶ ἐπληρώθη) in v 23 with “was perfected” (ἐτελειώθη) in v 22, for v 23 constitutes a new beginning and the two corresponding clauses in v 22 round off that verse by itself: faith assists works—works perfect faith.

Even if we grant a break in thought between vv. 22 and 23, however, the pun is possible, similar to a “catchword” between sections (as at 1.12-13),

except that here it is a shared semantic domain rather than word root. Yet recourse to a “catchword” is superfluous, since Dibelius’s “new beginning” in v. 23 is not much of a beginning. Verses 20-24 are one unit of thought, as they develop Abraham as scriptural warrant for James’s argument that faith requires works. Given the tight relationship between vv. 22 and 23, Scot McKnight’s (2011, 254) comparison of ἐπληρώθη to ἐτελειώθη is appealing: “Since James is showing that Abraham’s Genesis 15:6 faith was ‘perfected’ (Jas 2.22) in the *Aqedah*, it stands to reason that ‘fulfilled’ means nearly the same. That is, the *Aqedah* consummated or brought to full realization (‘fulfilled’) the faith of Genesis 15:6.”

Few explicitly liken ἐτελειώθη in v. 22 to ἐπληρώθη in v. 23, as McKnight does, but it is quite common for scholars of James to note that the sense of fulfillment in v. 23 is atypical. There are, to be sure, some who maintain that Gen 15.6 was “fulfilled” by Gen 22 in a predictive way, similar to other fulfillment formulae in Jewish and Christian literature of the time (e.g., Popkes 2001, 206). On this reading, Gen 15.6 is conceived of as a passage of Scripture that is fulfilled by a later event, one that happens to occur soon thereafter, that is, Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac recorded in Gen 22. More scholars, however, note the apparent oddity of a passage, within the same biblical book and about the same character, fulfilling an earlier statement in anything like the same way that, say, Isa 7.14 is said to be fulfilled by the virgin birth (Matt 1.22-23). Rather, on this alternate reading, it is God’s declaration of Abraham’s righteousness, understood as an element of the narrative, that is then “flesh[ed] out or ‘fill[ed] full” in Abraham’s climactic act (quoting Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 137). The “filling out” of Abraham’s incipient faith (v. 22), then, coordinates closely with the “fulfilling” of Gen 15.6 (v. 23), both of which culminate in Abraham’s testing.

There are other indications that τελειώω (or cognate words) and πληρώω overlap appreciably in meaning, increasing the chance that this wordplay would register with James’s audience. Already noted were the equivalent phrases τελειώω τὰς χεῖράς τινος and πληρώω τὰς χεῖράς τινος in the Septuagint. We find the same in early Christian literature. John’s Gospel regularly speaks of scriptural fulfillment with πληρώω (12.38; 13.18; 15.25, etc.), but in 19.28 it has its own wordplay (continued in v. 30), “After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished [τετέλεσται], he said (in order to fulfill [τελειωθῆ, not πληρωθῆ] the scripture), ‘I am thirsty.’” In the Apostolic Fathers, visions (Hermas, *Visions* 4.1.3) and prophetic words (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 16.2) are “fulfilled,” also using τελειώω instead of πληρώω (Delling 1972, 84).

There are a handful of similar examples in Luke-Acts. Luke 1.45 speaks of a “fulfillment” (τελειώσις) of the angelic word to Mary. Near the end of the Gospel, Jesus predicts, “For I tell you, this scripture must be

fulfilled [δεῖ τελεσθῆναι] in me, ‘And he was counted among the lawless’; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled”—or, more literally, “has its fulfillment” (τέλος ἔχει, Luke 22.37). In other passages (Luke 18.31; Acts 13.29), τελέω is utilized to speak of Scriptures being either “accomplished” or “fulfilled” by Jesus, and it might be overly precise to tease out any distinction from πληρώω.

In the above cases, as with my suggestion about Jas 2, τελ- words take on the sense of “fulfill” that we usually associate with πληρώω. The reverse can also occur. Luke 7.1 records, “After Jesus had finished [ἐπλήρωσεν] all his sayings,” whereas similar statements in Matthew (e.g., 11.1) have ἐτέλεσεν (noted by BDAG, s.v. τελέω, 1). All these examples indicate that ἐτελειώθη and ἐπληρώθη would have been heard as sometimes interchangeable words when Jas 2.22-23 was read.

Two translations, one very old and one very new, draw out this pun. First, in the venerable Wycliffe Bible (Later Version, 1395), the passage reads, “Therefore thou seest, that faith wrought with his works, and his faith *was filled* of works. And the scripture *was filled* . . . .” Of recent vintage, N. T. Wright’s NTE runs, “You can see from this that faith was cooperating along with the works, and the faith *reached its fulfilment* through the works. That is how the scripture *was fulfilled* . . . .” My proposal for “was filled out” and “fulfilled,” in vv. 22 and 23, respectively, therefore has precedent, even if not widespread circulation.

*In sum.* I propose a threefold wordplay on the concept of full and empty in Jas 2.20-23. There are scholars who mention a connection between κενέ (v. 20) and ἐτελειώθη (v. 22) and others between ἐτελειώθη (v. 22) and ἐπληρώθη (v. 23), but these are minority positions. Insofar as I am aware, no one has related all three as involving a common pun. Yet it is in keeping with James’s vivid style to see an “empty” person being told to learn from the “filled out” faith of Abraham whose willingness to sacrifice Isaac “fulfilled” the earlier pronouncement about his righteousness.

## Significance

It is conceivable that the pun I discern holds no significance beyond rhetoric. As I have noted previously, the uses of πειρασμός (1.12) and πειράζω (1.13) occur in separate subsections, and it would be mistaken to read the meaning of one into the other. The repetition provides a euphonic transfer from one idea to the next, but the senses remain distinct. In this case, we could imagine James writing a subtle threefold pun with a sly smile, and make nothing more of it.

I am inclined to think it is more than mere wordplay, however. If so, there are two ways it could hold wider significance.

### Thematic significance

First, completion is an integrative idea in the Epistle of James, and the pun would align with this wider motif. Ralph Martin (1988, lxxix–lxxxii), in fact, lists “perfection” (equivalent to my “completion”) first among the major themes of James, one that incorporates other major concepts in the letter, listing examples such as works, wisdom, faith, law, and, later, endurance. Τέλειος (“complete,” “perfect,” five times) and cognate words (τελέω, ἀποτελέω, τελειώω, and τέλος once each) recur in the epistle, as do coordinating pairings using different vocabulary, such as empty and full, incipient and mature, divided and whole. Completion is woven into James in at least seven passages.

In four places the completion theme concerns growth in the moral life. Two of these are in ch. 1: (1) In the very first discourse (1.2-8), the audience is enjoined to regard trials joyfully and allow “endurance [to] have its full [τέλειον] effect, so that you may be mature [τέλειοι] and complete [ὀλόκληροι], not lacking anything” (v. 4). Here to be “mature” is to be “complete,” having received the “full” effect of perseverance. Following this is a reminder that God will give wisdom generously to anyone who “is lacking” (λείπεται, v. 5) it and a warning about being “double-minded” (δίψυχος, v. 8). (2) Not long after, James presents genealogies of good and evil (1.12-18). Negatively, desire conceives and gives birth to sin, and sin—when “fully grown” (ἀποτελεσθεῖσα)—gives birth to death (v. 15). Positively, God gives “every perfect [τέλειον] gift” and gives birth to us by the word of truth (vv. 17-18).

The ethical implications continue in later chapters: (3) The language of τέλειος returns with regard to the tongue in 3.1-11. James laments, “For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect [τέλειος], able to keep the whole [ὅλον] body in check with a bridle” (v. 2). “Perfect” here bridges two meanings. The τέλειος person is faultless (“makes no mistakes”) but also complete (able to keep the “whole body in check”). The language of “whole” continues in vv. 3, 6, and James ends the section mocking the dividedness of humans in their speech, when neither springs nor plants behave thus (vv. 9-12). (4) Near the end of the letter, the value of endurance is reiterated (5.7-11), and one example mentioned is Job, whose life evidences “the purpose of the Lord [τὸ τέλος κυρίου], how the Lord is compassionate and merciful” (v. 11). Τὸ τέλος κυρίου could be “the outcome of the Lord’s dealings” (NASB) instead, in the sense that Job’s *entire* story indicates God’s mercy.

Three times τέλειος is associated with Scripture. These passages intertwine with those on the moral life, for Scripture provides ethical exemplars (such as Job) and James’s instruction includes divine commands. (1) I noted on 1.17-18 that God gives birth to us by the word of truth, and slightly

later (1.19-25) James mentions the “implanted [ἔμφυτον] word that has the power to save your souls” (v. 21). The doers of the word (vv. 22-24) are those “who look into the perfect [τέλειον] law, the law of liberty, and persevere,” thereby receiving blessing (v. 25). This “perfect” could be “without error,” but it might also have a shade of meaning closer to “full.” (2) In prohibiting favoritism (2.1-13), James commends, “You do well if you really fulfill [τελείετε] the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (v. 8). There is a need to keep “the whole [ὅλον] law” (v. 10), not failing at any point (v. 11). (3) In ch. 4, James asks rhetorically whether Scripture speaks “for nothing”—“emptily” (κενῶς, v. 5). The context (4.1-10) contrasts those who follow God with their full selves to the “double-minded” (δίψυχοι, v. 8) who pursue both God and the world.

τέλειος and its related words, then, occur frequently among metaphors such as empty and full, incipient and mature, and divided and whole. This completion theme is prominent in James, and seldom is there positive evidence to associate it with “faultless” (cf. Jas 3.2, and even there “wholeness” is mentioned in the next breath). Rather, to quote Martin (1988, lxxx), “perfection” in James means “obedience to the divine commands rather than the rabbinic idea of ‘free from defect,’” with works as “the necessary counterpart to and complement of” faith. This is also the conclusion of theological dictionaries. Delling (1972, 74) glosses τέλειος with the terms “whole,” “complete,” “total,” and “entire.” Schippers (1986, 63, 65) characterizes its “basic meaning” as “‘whole’ in James,” and later summarizes the NT connotation, especially in Matthew and James, as “the undivided wholeness of a person in his behavior” and “the anticipation in time of eschatological wholeness.”

To be τέλειος, then, is to be so filled with undivided goodness, matured over time, that error is supplanted. The pun in Jas 2.20-23 fits seamlessly into this notion. Although the rebuke against the κενός individual is harsh, Richard Bauckham (1999, 125) argues that the person is not an opponent, but a student, as suits the diatribe genre. Thus the “empty” interlocutor is called to learn from Abraham how faith is filled out in works, just as the declaration in Gen 15.6 is fulfilled at Abraham’s test in Gen 22.

Additionally, the completion theme might be associated with another motif in James. Several commentators have drawn connections between ἐτελειώθη and the ἐργ- terms in vv. 20-24 (e.g., Burchard 2000, 129; Wall 1997, 148-49). It would be too intricate to suggest that the working/unworking paronomasia and the empty/full pun in this pericope constitute one yet more elaborate wordplay. “Full” and “working” are distinct concepts, after all. Still, in my reconstruction, the two rhetorical devices are situated alongside each other, so they would presumably be designed to reinforce one another. Conceptually this is apt, since the “empty” faith is,

arguably, lacking specifically in works. That which is incomplete is also generally inoperative.

### *Historical significance*

The second point of potential significance is less sure but intriguing historically. In early Christian literature, the Shepherd of Hermas is the rare writing that appears to rely on James, and the *Didache* has its own share of verbal ties with the letter. Mayor (1910, 102) notes the possibility that Hermas, *Mandate* 11.3.13, refers to Jas 2.20, and he also lists *Didache* 2.5 as a point of comparison. In both cases, several elements of the completion theme in James are picked up, including points directly from 2.20-23.

Narrowly, the eleventh command among the *Mandates* includes this depiction, in the verse cited by Mayor. The false prophet

associates with the double-minded [διψύχοις] and empty-headed [κενοίς], and prophesies to them in a corner and deceives them; everything he says is in accordance with their own desires and characterized by his own empty manner [κενώς], for he is answering those who are empty [κενοίς]. For the empty [κενόν] vessel placed together with other empty [κενῶν] vessels is not broken, but they match one another. (*Mandate* 11.13, in Holmes 2007, 542–43)

Only one word apart in Greek are two key terms from James's completion motif, διψυχος and κενός. Looking at the eleventh command as a whole, there is an extended play on empty/full, divided/whole. The threat of deception is introduced thus:

The one seated on the chair is a false prophet who destroys the mind of God's servants; that is, he destroys the mind of the double-minded [διψύχων], not of believers. The double-minded [διψυχοί] come to him as a fortune-teller and ask him what will happen to them. And that false prophet, not having the power of a divine spirit in himself, answers them in accordance with their questions and their wicked desires, and fills [πληροῖ] their souls just as they themselves wish. For since he himself is empty [κενός], he gives empty answers [κενά] to empty inquirers [κενοίς], for no matter what is asked, he answers according to the emptiness [κένωμα] of the one asking. But he does speak some true words, for the devil fills [πληροῖ] him with his own spirit, to see if he will be able to break down any of the righteous. (*Mandate* 11.1-3, in Holmes 2007, 538–41)

The descriptions, in these passages and their near context, of the false prophet and his hearers as “empty” (vv. 14, 15, etc.) and “double-minded” (vv. 4, 13, etc.) are repeated across the chapter. By contrast, the spirit of prophecy “fills” (πληροῖ) the true prophet (v. 9). The acid test of the prophets is their deeds (vv. 7-16). So the whole of the eleventh commandment,

and not just v. 13, puns on empty and full, divided and unified, in ways reminiscent of James.

In the *Didache*, part of the second commandment is, “You shall not be double-minded [διγνώμων] or double-tongued [δίγλωσσος], for the double tongue [δίγλωσσία] is a deadly snare. Your word must not be false [ψευδής] or meaningless [lit.: ‘empty,’ κενός], but confirmed [lit.: ‘filled,’ μεμεστωμένος] by action” (2.4-5, in Holmes 2007, 346–47). Once more, we see the language of empty and full alongside divided and (implicitly) whole. In this case κενός is the only word also found in James, but μεστώω is reminiscent of τελειώω and πληρώω, and the “double” (δι-) terms of δίψυχος.

Perhaps these constellations of themes in the *Didache* and especially in Hermas indicate an appropriation of James’s completion theme, whether from 2.20-23 or from the entire letter. Or perhaps they are best explained another way, by a common source or common wisdom imagery within certain Christian circles. Even if there is no literary connection between either of these writings and James on this point, these two examples of an empty/full wordplay alongside a divided/whole wordplay increase the likelihood that the pun I discern in James is not accidental—is not, shall we say, void of intent.

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## Abbreviations

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| BDAG | Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich 2000 (in References) |
| CEV  | Contemporary English Version (1995)                     |
| KJV  | King James Version (1611)                               |
| NASB | New American Standard Bible (1995)                      |
| NET  | NET Bible (New English Translation, 2001)               |
| NRSV | New Revised Standard Version (1989)                     |
| NTE  | New Testament for Everyone (2011)                       |
| TLV  | Tree of Life Version (2014)                             |