# God Gave Us Birth

BY MARIAM J. KAMELL

The letter of James is commonly misread as an awkward misfit that constantly focuses on works instead of the grace of God through Christ. Instead, the letter is an appeal for disciples to become what they are: the first-fruits of a restored creation, set free to live according to God's character.

According to a common but unfortunate reading, the epistle of James appears to be an awkward New Testament misfit that constantly focuses on works instead of the grace of God through Christ.[1] It is assumed that James needs justification instead of allowing it to challenge our presuppositions. In fact, James has a profound theology that undergirds the whole epistle, but as with other wisdom texts, the theology provides the foundation and frame for the epistle without being often overt. There are several places, however, where the theology does become explicit, and James's view of salvation becomes most clear in 1:16-18, 21, and 2:12-13.

James follows the covenantal pattern set up by God's interactions with Israel in the Old Testament. "The ideal relationship that should exist between YHWH and Israel is a relationship of love," Alexander Rofé notes. "YHWH loved the Patriarchs (Deuteronomy 4.37; 10.15) or Israel (7.8) and for that reason elected the nation. The nation, for its part, must respond to him with complete love (7.5; 10.12; 11.1, 13, 22), which means absolute loyalty to YHWH and acceptance of his service with all one's heart."[2] God, of his own free will, chose Israel and made them his people in love. The correct response to such love from God would be love demonstrated through obedience. God promised immense blessings for obedience, but disobedience brought oppression in its wake. This was not a capricious punishment on God's part, however. Israel was called to be an image of God in a world that

followed the path of Lamach, to be a light to the nations, and this calling was to be made possible because of God's choice of and presence with Israel.

Where Israel failed, however, James sees God as beginning a new work of creation in the Church. This is a work again initiated by God's will and sustained by his presence, but now the word has been implanted and the calling is thereby higher and yet truly achievable. In retaining this covenantal pattern into the New Testament, James is not a rogue teacher but closely following his own teacher, Jesus.[3] The same teacher who promised, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28), also told the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:23-35). In the parable, a king grants mercy to the first servant of his own free will. This mercy ought to have evoked a similar mercy in the servant toward another, but its failure to do so leads the king to revoke his initial mercy. Jesus' point is clear: God's mercy is not fickle, but it will bear fruit in keeping with God's character.

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Given this background in the Old Testament and Jesus' teaching, the questions we should ask when approaching James are twofold. First, how does James see the relationship with God commencing in his audience? Is there any sense of God's initial mercy as appears in Jesus' parable of Matthew 18, or does James present an a-theological ethic for which he is often condemned? And second, can James's language of judgment and mercy reveal this to be a profoundly freeing epistle? These two questions will guide us as we sift the subtle theology of James.

### A COVENANTAL PATTERN OF SALVATION (JAMES 1:16-18)

The epistle of James follows in essence the three-fold pattern of God's covenant with Israel: a choosing done solely by the will of God, a law being given, and later judgment or mercy to be attained on the basis of adherence to that law. James, however, makes some subtle changes to the pattern, making it clear that something has shifted within this Jewish framework.

First, James issues the caution of 1:16: "Do not be deceived, my beloved." This initial warning against deception serves as a hinge verse, standing both as a rebuke for blaming God for falling prey to one's own temptation, as well as pointing forward to the truth of what God does give. Often verse 16 is paired with verses 13-15 (as seen in the NRSV), but the warning may actually

be better joined with the following statement regarding God's character. Placed with verses 17-18, verse 16 functions to reiterate and underline 1:6-7: doubting the goodness and generosity of God's character is dangerous and can lead to one not "receiving" from the Lord (1:8).

James gives a solid introduction to the God about whom the audience must not be deceived. While it is not always emphasized, James's theology of God is central to the epistle, laid out most clearly in chapter one as the foundation of the commands that follow. James sees God as the good and generous giver (1:5-8, 17-18, 21) and the just judge (1:9-11, 12, 26-27). These themes repeat and intertwine throughout the epistle in ways crucial to understanding the theology of salvation therein. For instance, the fact that God is the one "who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly" (1:5) makes the illustration of an ungenerous faith in 2:14-17 all the more shocking. Faith in *this* God, James argues, should make persons generous, for they have experienced such a character of generosity themselves; their ungenerous behavior toward the hungry, therefore, calls their faith into question. In the same way, calling God the source of temptation and doubting his good generosity implies that one has not actually known him.

Having warned the audience not to be misled about who their God is, James proceeds to make God's character apparent, beginning in 1:17 with the redundant "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down…." This repetitive statement highlights the extravagant generosity of God, from whom good gifts keep coming. These gifts are not the same as the outcome of endurance in 1:12 (the rewarded "crown of life"), but the sum total of every good aspect of life that cannot be earned, such as wisdom (1:5) and redemption (1:18). In contrast, to those who sought to argue that God could be both the source of good gifts and yet also responsible for temptation, James adds that in this God "there is no variation or shadow due to change." Commenting on this image of God's constant goodness, Dan McCartney states that in contrast to the heavenly "wanderers" (i.e., the planets), "God cannot be made to wander, nor does he entice people to wander.… [This] solidity and reliability of the wisdom of God was important, and the steadiness of the believers as lights is an important corollary in demonstrating the divine wisdom to the world."[4] God consistently seeks to give his people the good things—above and beyond what they need—so that they can live lives marked by God's consistency and generosity.

To James, life like this is not a dream or something gained by a simple grit-your-teeth ethic, but rather stems from God himself, as seen in the first half of verse 18: "In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth." That initial expression, "in fulfillment of his own purpose," all derives from a single participle that begins this profound verse in a highly emphatic position. Most likely a causal participle, it can also be translated, "because he was willing." Here is where James makes his most profound theological statement: as with all prior covenants with his people, every-

thing begins with God's willingness—with his work in electing and redeeming his people. Luke Timothy Johnson recognizes the power of this verse, which was widely picked up by the early church writers, when he calls it one of the "noblest" statements about God in the New Testament.[5] God was willing, and more than that, he willed that this process of a birth begin and brought it into being; James emphasizes that this is the only reason the community exists.[6] The language of birth here contrasts with the "birth" of death in 1:15 as a result of giving way to sin. Having been reborn by this "word of truth," the audience is no longer bound by their fallen natures to sin.

**James 1:21 commands readers to be what they are. The same word, by which they have been reborn, they still have yet to "receive." Although the word has been implanted, it cannot take root and grow in a hostile environment.**

Having been birthed by the "word of truth," the second half of the verse is where James indicates that he is not simply thinking in terms of Jewish covenantal patterns: "so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures."[7] The language of firstfruits brings overtones of the Old Testament sacrifice, the tithe due to God, as well as Pauline language in which Christ is the firstfruit of the resurrection and the new order. While firstfruit language is typical of the Old Testament, here James intimates that he and his audience have become the firstfruit of creation—something new, different, and indicating a greater fullness to come. The firstfruit language is a powerful indicator of James's revolutionary thinking, for this community to whom he writes is not simply a continuation of God's covenantal pattern but rather indicative that God is doing something new.[8] Here we see the first hint that James has moved into a new covenant theology, affirming the fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:31-34. James's use of the qualifier "a kind of," however, may well speak to his awareness of the "already/not yet" nature of this new birth. The believers have been reborn, but still struggle with obedience (James 1:13-15), something not anticipated by the prophets. This birth by the word of truth, however, has set the audience apart as the consecrated firstfruits, signs of a greater harvest to come, birthed by and dedicated to God. Typical to covenant patterns, love and obedience ought to follow. Election and service cannot be separated.

Essentially, James 1:16-18 provides the most crucial statement of James's theology of salvation. It includes an affirmation of God's true nature as consistently generous and good in contrast to the believers' own wavering natures. This passage then spells out the greatest of those gifts as salvation unto firstfruit status, a reality brought about solely by the will of God

through his word. Because of this remarkable change of status, James is then able to move on to implications for the Christian life.[9]

## A TRANSFORMED LIFE (JAMES 1:21 AND 2:12-13)

James's theology does not simply end with new birth. The implications of the firstfruit identity are far reaching and require cooperation. It is crucial, however, to hold in mind always the starting fact: original birth into this community is done solely "because he willed it," and the subsequent cooperation has its starting point solely within this willed work of God. It becomes clear, however, that people may choose not to make that work of God a reality in their own lives.

The place this is most evident is just three verses later, in 1:21. There James writes the twofold command: "Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls." The first half of the verse is a call to purity, a call to cleanse themselves of the moral filth that defiles. The participle that begins the verse is usually translated as a command: "rid yourselves," or "take off, put off." There are two things worth noting. First, this is after verse 18, where the audience has already been "given birth by the word of truth" and declared "firstfruits," so this work they are to do is in context of already having a new identity. Second, however, it is also a command for them to engage themselves into the process, for they have to choose to separate themselves from the moral filth that currently marks them. This is not an order for their passivity: it is not that something will *be done* to them. Rather, they are to *do* this cleansing.

Taken as a whole, verse 21 commands that the audience *be* what they *are*. The same word, by which they have been reborn, they still have yet to "receive." Although the word has been implanted, it cannot take root and grow in a hostile environment. This verse may echo Jesus' teaching about the sower and the seed on varied grounds (Matthew 13:1-9; Mark 4:1-9; Luke 8:4-8), for depending on the condition of the ground receiving it, the seed was not always able to bear fruit. In the same way, the "word of truth," as it is implanted in the soul, requires a hospitable environment if it is going to produce its fruit: the saving of their souls. Obedience makes it possible for the word to do its work.

Significantly, it is not obedience that does the saving; the *word* is what has the power to save souls, but it can reach its effect only when it is received in purity and humility. Contextually, the hearers have already been reborn, have already had the word implanted, but still the ground must be prepared if the word is to have its effect. The following verse makes the need for active reception even clearer: "But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves" (1:22). To hear the word of salvation but not obey it is simply another self-deception of a salvation-threatening sort. James does not teach salvation by works, but a salvation made possible by

obedient preparation for the word to work, reflecting the teachings of Jesus.

Another passage that should be discussed in relation to the covenantal nature of James's theology is James 2:12-13. Having moved away from the inception of salvation (birth by the word of truth), James now points to the final judgment. He warns his readers: "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment." James's view of salvation in this passage fits a wisdom paradigm about the reciprocal nature of showing mercy. This view can be found throughout the Old Testament (especially Deuteronomy and the writings of the prophets), but is codified in the book of Proverbs. For instance, in Proverbs 21:13, the sage observes, "If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard." This proverb states the same negative principle of James 2:13, Bruce Waltke contends, that "The merciful obtain mercy (Proverbs 3:3-4; 19:17; Matthew 5:7; Luke 6:38), but the callous will not be pitied (cf. Psalm 109:6-20; Matthew 18:23-35; 25:31-46; James 2:13)."[10] Throughout the wisdom literature when God's justice is held up for examination, it is found repeatedly that the wicked receive judgment and the righteous receive mercy either in this life or afterward. Furthermore, one of the consistently crucial characteristics of the righteous is mercy. Mercy begets mercy, as will be finally and ultimately pronounced by Jesus: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy" (Matthew 5:7). The sages and Jesus all recognize a truism in God's character: those who are merciless to the helpless earn a reciprocal mercilessness for themselves in their time of need. Regarding Jesus' beatitude, W. D. Davies and Dale Allison query whether in the Gospel of Matthew "'mercy' and its cognates imply that merciful action is the concrete expression of loyalty to God, and that what God demands is not so much activity directed Godward ('I desire…not sacrifice') but loving-kindness benefiting other people ('I desire mercy')," and suggest that the beatitude refers to "the hope of receiving mercy at the last judgement."[11] All of the wisdom tradition leading up to and including Jesus agrees that the character of mercy is crucial for a merciful assessment at the final judgment.

This background informs our reading of James 2:12-13. He begins with obedience to the "law of freedom," which contextually is closely tied, if not identical with, the "word of truth" by which the entire process of salvation was started in 1:18 (the shift from "word" to "law" happens within the single paragraph of 1:22-25). Judgment will be done *according to the same entity* as that by which we are saved. James is not introducing a new, unexpected standard of judgment; instead, it can be described as "of freedom" (2:12) because it is the same "word that has the power to save your souls" (1:21). That encouragement, however, is paired with the equally strong warning of the necessity of mercy. On the one hand, a lack of mercy indicates a failure of fruit from the implanted word, and reveals us as self-deceived as to our status. On the other hand, James focuses on the responsiveness of God to

human actions. Just as human mercilessness invokes a reciprocal response, the positive restatement of 2:13a is that human actions of mercy can *succeed* in averting a negative judgment! Indeed, human acts of mercy evoke a response of mercy from God (cf. again Matthew 5:7).

Hence the exultant statement in 2:13b, that mercy triumphs over judgment. *Because God is just*, when his people live in accordance with his word, God *in his justice* responds to his people with mercy, not judgment. In the wisdom literature, perfection is never required for a merciful judgment by God, but a repentant heart that seeks to live in accordance with God's own character receives mercy. Mercy is a crucial sign of a life lived according to the law of freedom, of the fruiting of the implanted word of truth in a receptive heart. This is an unsurprising conclusion from the God who declared "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Matthew 9:13; 12:7; citing Hosea 6:6).

## CONCLUSION

Salvation, begun by the work of the good and generous God in his willing choice to give birth to a new people, comes full circle as he responds to seeing his own character now bearing fruit in his people. Kent Yinger observes that in Judaism, "one's *works* are not viewed mechanically or atomistically, but are a unitary whole revealing one's inner character of faith. Faith and works are not in competition with one another. Rather they represent two sides of the single coin of human response in the light of God's gracious covenantal arrangement."[12] As Moses reminded the people that God did not choose the Israelites because they deserved it but because he loved them of his own will (Deuteronomy 7:7-8), so also James sees God working again in creating a new people as the firstfruits of a renewed creation, chosen by his will (James 1:18). But in the same way Israel is warned against being a stiff-necked people who think they are "safe even though [they] go [their] own stubborn ways" (Deuteronomy 29:19), so also James warns those who deceive themselves and think that merely hearing the word is sufficient (James 1:21-25). For both groups, the warning of Deuteronomy 29:20 stands stark: "the LORD will be unwilling to pardon them, for the LORD's anger and passion will smoke against them. …the LORD will blot out their names from under heaven," or, as James puts it, "judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy" (James 2:13a).

In contrast, those who accept their status as firstfruits, actively receiving the word of truth in humility and obedience, find that their character begins to resemble that of their God. Their lives reveal the truth of the implanted word, through their *doing* of it (James 2:22-25); they become people marked by endurance, mercy, and wisdom. The implanted word has the power to save their souls precisely because it transforms them into people who mirror God's image and he recognizes himself when it comes time for judgment. Just as the king in Matthew 18 expected his mercy to bear fruit and the sower in Matthew 13 expected his seed to bear fruit, so also the implanted word

ought to bear the fruit of a character transformed to the likeness of God, and thereby bring about the salvation of the person.

Salvation in James begins with God's willing choice and ends with God's willing recognition, but in between is the individual's choice to submit and obey in humility. Without that step, the implanted word is like that seed that fell on rocky soil and sprang up, but quickly withered and did not bear fruit. James 1:21 implores the hearer to "welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls." It is an appeal to become what they are: the firstfruits of a restored creation, set apart by the creative word of God to be the very images of God, set free to live according to his character and therefore triumphant over the threat of judgment.

## NOTES

1 The epistle of James is not given much respect in biblical and theological circles. Within the newly reviving field of James studies, Martin Dibelius (1883-1947) famously claimed, "James has no theology" (Martin Dibelius, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, translated by Michael A. Williams, [Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1976], 21, 22). Alexander Chester concludes that "James's theology is limited in many ways," with little to no development on any theme but that of works (Alexander Chester, "The Theology of James," in Andrew Chester and Ralph P. Martin, *The Theology of the Letters of James, Peter, and Jude* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994], 44-45).

2 Alexander Rofé, *Deuteronomy: Issues and Interpretation* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2002), 13. Ray Carlton Jones, "Deuteronomy 10:12-22," *Interpretation* 46:3 (1992), 281, simplifies thus: "Election and service belong together in the Bible. The consequence of the Lord God's sovereign election of Israel is that Israel must serve the Lord."

3 Regarding the relationship of James to Jesus' teaching, see Richard Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage* (London: Routledge, 1999). In Robert W. Wall and Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, eds., *The Catholic Epistles and Apostolic Tradition* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), see Patrick J. Hartin, "James and the Jesus Tradition," 55-70; John S. Kloppenborg, "The Reception of the Jesus Tradition in James," 71-100; and John Painter, "James as the First Catholic Epistle," 161-182.

4 Dan McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 109. David Garland, in "Severe Trials, Good Gifts, and Pure Religion: James 1," *Review and Expositor* 83:3 (1986), 392, observes "God's goodness… is not as periodic as the full moon or the morning sunrise. It does not fade into the west." See Donald J. Verseput, "James 1:17 and the Jewish Morning Prayers," *Novum Testamentum* 39:2 (1997), 177-191, for a plausible background for this description of God as the "Father of lights" within Jewish prayers said each morning to thank God for his faithfulness in bringing the new day and his mercy evidenced thereby.

5 Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 204.

6 Tim Laato observes, "The participle [*boulētheis*] expresses (with the same sense as with Philo) the free and sovereign will of the creator. It underscores the independence of salvation from human powers." See his "Justification According to James: A Comparison with Paul," translated by Mark A. Siefrid, *Trinity Journal* 18:1 (1977), 43-84, here citing 48.

7 For more regarding James and the new covenant, see Miriam J. Kamell, "Incarnating Jeremiah's Promised New Covenant in the 'Law' of James," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 83:1 (2011), 19-28.

8 In contrast with my interpretation, L. E. Elliott-Binns, "James 1.18: Creation or Redemption?" *New Testament Studies* 3:2 (1957), 148–161, views this as a reference "to the original creation of which man was the crown and the promise." So also Martin Klein, *"Ein Vollkommenes Werk": Vollkommenheit, Gesetz Und Gericht Als Theologische Themen Des Jakobusbriefes*, Beitrage zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament 139 (Stuttgart, Germany: Kohlhammer, 1995), 129–134; and Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A. & C. Black, 1980), 77–78. There is broader support that this refers to a work of *new* creation, e.g., Dibelius, *James*, 104–107; Ben Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James and Jude* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 435; J. B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James*, 2nd edition (London: Macmillan, 1897), 57–58; Franz Mussner, *Der Jakobusbrief,* 3rd edition (Freiburg, Germany: Herder, 1975), 94–95; Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982), 89-90; and Patrick J. Hartin, *James*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 105. Also Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011), 130, reminds us that the Christian view of new creation included the entirety of creation in its final revelation.

9 See Matthias Konradt, *Christliche Existenz nach dem Jakobusbrief: eine Studie zue seiner soteriologischen and ethischen Konzeption* (Gottingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), for the most systematic work toward these conclusions regarding James 1:18 and 21. He acknowledges the importance of the rebirth imagery in 1:18 and the *consequent*, inherent move towards obedience, but does not see a connection with 2:12-13 and the nature of judgment there.

10 Bruce K. Waltke, *Proverbs 15-31*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 178–179. On the other hand, Tremper Longman, *Proverbs*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 393, suggests this proverb refers only to human reciprocity.

11 W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, volume 1 (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 455.

12 Kent L. Yinger, *Paul, Judaism, and Judgment According to Deeds*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 105 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 62, where he also qualifies, "One's works of obedience are not viewed as *merits*, each to be recompensed in atomistic fashion, but instead are the observable manifestations of the covenant loyalty of the unseen heart…. The requisite obedience (righteousness) was never viewed as *flawless perfection*, but might be better described by such terms as *consistency*, *integrity*, and *authenticity* of action.

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