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## “Receive the innate word that is able to save you” (Jas 1:21b): Soteriology in the Epistle of James

Ursula Ulrike Kaiser

### 1. Introduction

The Epistle of James is usually not the first place to look for soteriological statements in the New Testament writings. Luther criticized this letter calling it an “epistle of straw” (“stroherne Epistel”)<sup>1</sup> since it didn’t display a great emphasis on what Luther considered to be the centre of scripture: Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> He was also taken aback by the way the Epistle of James values “works” (ἔργα) as essential for the salvific power of faith to be effective (Jas 2:14: οὕτως καὶ ἡ πίστις, ἐὰν μὴ ἔχη ἔργα, νεκρά ἐστὶν καθ’ ἑαυτήν). Luther’s theological and physical relegation of the Epistle to the end of the New Testament (followed only by the Epistle of Jude and Revelations) has been influential over centuries of Protestant readings of this letter.<sup>3</sup> But in contrast to this position there is more to say about soteriology in the Epistle of James than to criticize this letter for overemphasising the role of ethics compared to the role of faith.

Undoubtedly, appealing for works (ἔργα) and for proper behaviour in accordance with faith clearly remains a main concern of this New Testament writing. But in the first and opening chapter of his epistle, James<sup>4</sup> is also speaking about the *basis* which enables believers in Christ to perform those works in the first place. To make his point clear, James goes right back to the beginning of Christian life: “Out of his will God gave us birth by the word of truth” (βουληθεὶς ἀπεκύησεν ἡμᾶς λόγῳ ἀληθείας, Jas 1:18a). This metaphorical statement reveals a lot about soteriology in the Epistle of James. But the metaphor needs to be interpreted carefully within its surrounding context. According to more recent approaches to metaphor, I understand metaphorical expressions as *textual* phenomena.<sup>5</sup> The meaning of such expressions has to be reconstructed by identifying “focal words” in the text<sup>6</sup> that invoke a certain concept (the so-called “source domain”) which is used to describe another concept or idea (the “target domain”). This latter concept is usually less concrete and comprehensible and gains clarity by being explained in terms of a well-known and well-structured source domain.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore not surprising at all to find complex soteriological matters expressed by metaphors all over the New Testament. Since Cilliers

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, WA.DB 6, 10: „Darumb ist sankt Jacobs Epistel eyn rechte stroern Epistel gegen sie [sc. John; 1 John; Rom; Gal; Eph; 1 Peter], denn sie doch keyn Euangelisch art an yhr hat.“

<sup>2</sup> Only Jas 1:1 and 2:1 mention Jesus Christ at all, and even though he is called κύριος in these two verses almost all other occurrences of κύριος in the Epistle of James refer to God and not to Jesus (only Jas 5:7–8 might be different; cf. Frankemölle, *Jakobus*, 679).

<sup>3</sup> Especially German-speaking biblical scholars have only recently started to rehabilitate the Letter of James and to explore its theological positions (cf. e.g. Frankemölle; Konradt; Popkes; Theißen).

<sup>4</sup> It is assumed here that the Letter of James is a pseudepigraphical writing (cf. e.g. Johnson, *James*, 92, 108–116, with a detailed discussion of the main arguments). Therefore, when I use ‘James’ in the following text it is not to be taken as a reference to a specific person. Furthermore, I understand the address “to the twelve tribes in dispersion” as inviting readers with a distinctive Jewish background and others with pagan roots likewise (cf. e.g. Burchard, *Jakobusbrief*, 6; Theißen, *Intention*, 60); see more below 3.

<sup>5</sup> My theoretical and methodological approach to metaphors is mainly based upon Conceptual Metaphor Theory (cf. more closely Kaiser, *Rede*, 10–24) as it was introduced to a wider audience by Lakoff/Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, and, in my view, is best explained by Kövecses, *Metaphor*.

<sup>6</sup> In order to highlight such focal words in a given text, they will be printed in italics.

<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the context of a metaphorical expression needs to be searched for further by identifying additional focal words and/or other hints highlighting *which* parts of the source domain should be activated by the readers during their process of metaphorical understanding.

Breytenbach has taken up the important task of interpreting soteriological metaphors on many occasions, this contribution be dedicated to him.<sup>8</sup>

Exegetical scholars pursuing the metaphorical statement of Jas 1:18a have been putting considerable effort into clarifying the exact meaning of λόγος ἀληθείας. Likewise, the continuation of this statement (“... to become some kind of *first fruit* among his creatures”, Jas 1:18b) and especially the use of the term ἀπαρχή has been questioned. The verb ἀποκύειν on the other hand attracted far less attention in exegetical discussions about this verse even though its metaphorical use invokes a source domain—namely BIRTH<sup>9</sup>—that tells a lot about preconditions of life which cannot be influenced by the one who is being born but are *given* to this person. This metaphor of birth therefore proves highly important when looking for soteriological statements in the Epistle of James and for traces of grace granted independently of human merits. It becomes even more interesting if one notices that Jas 1:18a is not the only instantiation of a birth metaphor in the opening section of the letter. This article will therefore focus on the “net” of birth metaphors that spans the whole section of Jas 1:15 up to Jas 1:23–25 and thereby prove that the Epistle of James is a New Testament writing where truly interesting soteriological statements can be found.

## 2. Observations on the structure of Jas 1 and the instantiations of birth metaphors within this chapter

For a long time, theologians didn’t allocate any distinct outline to the Epistle of James.<sup>10</sup> However, during the last decades exegetical scholars have been intensifying their efforts to understand the given structure of the letter as intended and meaningful.<sup>11</sup> After the short prescript (Jas 1:1), the first chapter of the letter can be divided into two main sections. The first one (Jas 1:2–12)<sup>12</sup> addresses several topics (temptations, endurance, faith, wisdom, wealth) which will be further developed in the following chapters of the letter. The matter of “temptations” though is taken up immediately in the second section (Jas 1:13–25).<sup>13</sup> This might be the case because the readers could easily misunderstand the temptations, which Jas 1:2 and 1:12 describe as a touchstone of the strength of their faith, as given from God. Jas 1:13–14 clarifies that everyone is tempted by his or her very own desires. It is not clear what kind of desires and temptations James has in mind here. But unmistakably they finally lead into death if one doesn’t stand the test. Describing the lethal development that will follow, James uses birth metaphors for the first time in his letter: “Then, when temptation *has conceived, it gives birth* to sin, and sin, when it is *fully grown, gives birth* to death” (Jas 1:15: εἴτα ἡ ἐπιθυμία συλλαβοῦσα τίκει ἁμαρτίαν, ἡ δὲ ἁμαρτία ἀποτελεσθεῖσα ἀποκύει θάνατον). Contrary to those *self*-procured temptations, Jas 1:17

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. e.g. Breytenbach, *Versöhnung*; and id., *Grace*.

<sup>9</sup> The use of small capitals indicates the designation of a domain.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. especially the extreme position of M. Dibelius who proclaims a complete lack of structure for the whole letter (Dibelius, *Jakobus*, 14: “*es fehlt in dem ganzen Schriftstück der gedankliche Zusammenhang*”). Dibelius’ position was influential not only in German scholarship.

<sup>11</sup> Still, proposals to structure the letter differ quite a lot; cf. e.g. Johnson, *James*, 11–16.

<sup>12</sup> Jas 1:12 is sometimes also understood as a transitional verse or the opening of the next section Jas 1:13–25. But regarding keywords as ὑπομένειν (1:12) – ὑπομονή (1:3); πειρασμός (1:12) – πειρασμοί (1:2), and δοκιμος (1:12) – δοκίμιον (1:3) Jas 1:2–3 and 1:12 rather seem to frame this first section of the letter.

<sup>13</sup> Jas 1:26–27 is a transitional section leading from principal statements in the first chapter to more concrete instructions about how to put into praxis “a worship that is pure and undefiled” (θρησκεία καθαρὰ καὶ ἀμίαντος, 1:27) in the following chapters.

underlines that every good and perfect gift is considered to be a present coming from God from above. It is also this God, “the Father of lights” (Jas 1:17), who gives birth to “us” according to his “will” and “through the word of truth” (Jas 1:18a).

Here the source domain BIRTH is used again for a metaphorical expression though in a strikingly different manner than in Jas 1:15.<sup>14</sup> The literary form of Jas 1:15 can be classified as a “chain of filiations” (“Filiationsreihe”). Like in Rom 5:3b–4; 2 Pet 1,5–7; Pol. *Phil.* 3:3 e.g. one virtue or vice emerges out of another thereby creating a whole genealogy.<sup>15</sup> Birth-terminology can be used to express this chain of filiations but can also be replaced by more general expressions of emerging (cf. Rom 5:3b: καταργάζειν).<sup>16</sup> In any case, the strict sequence stresses the necessity of what follows. In terms of conceptual metaphor theory, this way of expressing dependency makes use of the conceptual metaphor CAUSATION IS PROGENERATION.<sup>17</sup> Within this framework, the statement in Jas 1:15 is special for its paradox: at the end of a sequence of conceiving, giving birth, growing again, and giving birth again, the emerging of *life* would be expected but *death* is predicted.

Taking up the source domain BIRTH as well, Jas 1:18a differs completely.

15a	εἶτα ἡ ἐπιθυμία συλλαβοῦσα	τίκτει ἁμαρτίαν	
15b	ἡ δὲ ἁμαρτία ἀποτελεσθεῖσα	ἀποκύει θάνατον	
18a	βουληθεῖς	ἀπεκόησεν ἡμᾶς	λόγῳ ἀληθείας

Even though the text doesn’t state explicitly that *life* is the outcome of God’s birthing activity in 1:18a, it can nevertheless be assumed when the “Father of lights” (most likely an allusion to Gen 1) is at work.<sup>18</sup> There is also no emphasis on any kind of necessity. On the contrary, God’s action is specially marked as taking place according to his own will and through the “word of truth”. Accordingly, Jas 1:18a doesn’t use the rhetorical form of a “chain of filiations” again but describes merely *one* act of giving birth. With the continuation of the sentence in verse 18b, James takes up another source domain. By assigning those (i.e. “us”) who are born by God “to become some kind of *first fruit* among his creatures” (εἰς τὸ εἶναι ἡμᾶς ἀπαρχὴν τινα τῶν αὐτοῦ κτισμάτων), James creates a cultic metaphor that has to be clarified separately (see below 4.).

Jas 1:19 starts with an imperative (“Ἴστε, ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί) and seems to bring up an entirely new topic. Therefore, many bible translations and commentaries mark Jas 1:19 as the beginning of a new section. By doing so they miss that the thread of Jas 1:18a is taken up again in Jas 1:21. It is not only the “word” (λόγος) that refers back to Jas 1:18a, but there is also another instantiation of the birth metaphor connected with it: The “word” which has to be “received” or “accepted” by the readers (δέξασθε) is specified as a λόγος ἔμφυτος—an “innate word”. But since ἔμφυτος can also mean “implanted,” most biblical scholars and basically all bible translations assume an agricultural metaphor here even though there are no further signs in the surrounding text to strengthen the semantic field of AGRICULTURE or PLANT LIFE. Rather, Jas 1:18a; 1:15 and 1:23–24 (see below) offer good reason to

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Allison, *James*, 278: “The contrasts with vv. 14–15 are forceful.”

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Berger, *Formen*, 211.

<sup>16</sup> Also Jas 1:3–4a is comparable, though the imperative at the end doesn’t fit into the literary framework completely. A modern example for this rhetorical form can be found in J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (London 2005, 415): “Greatness inspires envy, envy engenders spite, spite spawns lies”.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Turner, *Death*, 143 passim.

<sup>18</sup> Important to notice is also the link to Jas 1:12 and its contrast to 1:15. In 1:12 the “crown of *life*” is promised to the man who endures temptation.

understand ἔμφυτος as another focal word belonging to the source domain BIRTH and therefore to be understood as “innate”.<sup>19</sup> Following this line of thought, there is obviously no strong break to be detected between Jas 1:18 and 1:19. Jas 1:19–20 rather intensifies the involvement of the readers by directly addressing them and by offering a kind of example for what could be meant by “impureness and overflowing wickedness” of which the readers should rid themselves according to Jas 1:21a (ἀποθέμενοι πᾶσαν ῥυπαρίαν καὶ περισσεΐαν κακίας). After stressing the active part and telling his audience what to do and how to behave, Jas 1:21b combines an exhortation (δέξασθε) with a soteriological promise: This “innate word” which the readers are to receive is a word which is able to *save* their lives (λόγος δυνάμενος σῶσαι τὰς ψυχὰς ὑμῶν).<sup>20</sup>

In Jas 1:22 the “word” is central again —now in connection with the admonition to not only hearing it, but to doing it accordingly. To explain this, Jas 1:23–25 tells a little parable.<sup>21</sup> To hear the word but not to act accordingly is compared to a man looking into a mirror, recognizing his face (τὸ πρόσωπον τῆς γενέσεως αὐτοῦ, Jas 1:23) and immediately forgetting what he looks like when he goes away. Scholarly explanations of this parable usually concentrate on questions like: what this man’s mistake was, what it was that he forgot by going away, and what the mirror could stand for, thereby moving towards an almost allegorical interpretation. But the rather special expression τὸ πρόσωπον τῆς γενέσεως αὐτοῦ (Jas 1:23) for one’s reflection in a mirror should again be seen as part of the network of birth metaphors: The “face of origin” refers to the look one inherits (at least in general) through birth. What one looks like can neither be lost nor is it likely that one should forget it entirely. Therefore, the little parable about this man who recognized his “face of origin” in the mirror but immediately forgot it as he went away is telling a rather unlikely story. In which way the telling of an unlikely story could fit into the whole line of argumentation in Jas 1:13–25 will have to be taken up again in the conclusion (see below 5.)

### 3. God giving birth by the word of truth: Jas 1:18a and 1:21b

As stated above, according to the Epistle of James, Christian life begins with an action of God: “Out of his will God gave us birth by the word of truth to be a kind of first fruit among his creatures” (βουληθεὶς ἀπεκύησεν ἡμᾶς λόγῳ ἀληθείας εἰς τὸ εἶναι ἡμᾶς ἀπαρχὴν τινα τῶν αὐτοῦ κτισμάτων, 1:18). But does this statement really mean the beginning of *Christian* life and does it justify an understanding of the “word of truth” as an expression for the word of the gospel? Could it not be a reference to the beginning of life at all, i.e. creation? Or could λόγος ἀληθείας be the law (Torah) and would Jas 1:18a therefore be a reference to Israel and the life-giving potential of God’s law and the covenant?<sup>22</sup> Doubtless, in any case it is God who is the one who acts first. But according to the three different positions (in short: creation, law, the gospel) the importance of the birth metaphor would be different in each case and Jas 1:18 might not have a soteriological meaning at all. To determine what λόγος ἀληθείας means and if Jas

<sup>19</sup> Jas 1:21b shows a certain tension since it demands of a person to “receive” or “accept” something which is already inherent to this person (see below 3.). The tension though is not brought up with the understanding of ἔμφυτος as “innate” but would be the same for an “implanted” word.

<sup>20</sup> This power of the word should not be as dependent on the act of receiving; see below 3.

<sup>21</sup> To be precise, Jas 1:25 is not part of the parable but offers some sort of explanation equating the gaze into the mirror with looking into the “perfect law of freedom” followed by a beatitude of the man who stays with this law and abides it.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. e.g. Allison, *James*, 280, for those three main positions of understanding Jas 1:18.

1:18a refers to the act of creation, to the giving of the law, or to becoming a Christ-believer through the word of the gospel, at least three intertwined questions must be sufficiently answered for each position:

(a) Who is “us” in Jas 1:18a?

(b) Does the answer to this first question lead to a convincing explanation of the singling out of “us” to “be a kind of first fruit (ἀπαρχή) among his creatures” in Jas 1:18b as well? (This question will be taken up again below [4.] since the meaning of ἀπαρχή in Jas 1:18b needs further clarification.)

(c) Is the proposed position supported by the context of Jas 1:13–25 as a whole, and does it pay due attention to the reappearance of BIRTH as a source domain over this whole section of the letter?

It won’t be necessary here to cover all the arguments brought up in scholarly discussions about creation, law, or the gospel being the intended understanding of the “word of truth” in Jas 1:18 but only the most relevant.<sup>23</sup> If λόγος ἀληθείας is taken to refer to God’s word of creation, Jas 1:18a is a statement that applies to all creatures since they all came into being through God’s will and word. Therefore, from this point of view “us” addresses all human beings (a). But then question (b) becomes difficult to answer in a satisfying way. The assignment of all men to become “some kind of first fruit” could in this case only describe the singling out of all human beings in favour of the rest of creation.<sup>24</sup> But this thought would be somewhat out of place here and doesn’t find an echo in the whole Epistle of James either since the letter doesn’t show any interest in discussing the relationship between men and the rest of creation. What needs to be said in favour of understanding the “word of truth” as God’s word of creation is that there are allusions to God’s role as the creator of the world at least in Jas 1:17 (πατήρ τῶν φώτων), in Jas 1:18b (κτίσματα) and perhaps also in βουληθεῖς at the beginning of Jas 1:18. James is certainly aware of the life-giving power of the creator-God when he talks about him giving birth to “us”. But, if pointing out the act of creation would be the aim of this sentence—why would James take up BIRTH for a source domain (c) and refrain from describing God’s action as ‘forming’ or ‘creating’?<sup>25</sup>

The second thesis claims that λόγος ἀληθείας means the law. Therefore, God’s giving birth to “us” would refer to the formation of Israel as God’s people abiding by the law. Contrary to the first position, this would limit the addressees of the letter—i.e. “us”—strictly to a Judaeo-Christian group of believers (a). Their being singled out as a “firstling” could well be understood in terms of the election of Israel as God’s chosen people (b). Taking the “word of truth” to be the law would also well fit in with the following admonitions to receive the word (1:21) and to do the “word” instead of only hearing it (Jas 1:22).<sup>26</sup> However, reading the Epistle of James from the *beginning* would not lead to a nomistic understanding of the “word of truth” in Jas 1:18a in the first place (c). The expression is also not attested in any other writing to refer to the law. There are no occurrences in the Jewish and early Christian literature for the law being phrased as a “word of truth”. Texts like Ps 118:43 LXX; *T. Gad* 3:1; *Pss.*

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. for a detailed discussion: Kaiser, *Rede*, 359–387.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Elliott-Binns, *Creation*, 156: „The reference in James [1:18] is, I believe, to the original creation of which man was the crown and the promise.“

<sup>25</sup> Commentators tend to ignore this question and prefer to identify the use of λόγος ἀληθείας as the main contradiction to an understanding of Jas 1:18a as referring to creation, cf. e.g. Allison, *James*, 282: “There does not appear to have been any traditional link between ‘truth’ and the creation of the world. Furthermore, the use of λόγος in the verses immediately following has nothing to do with the divine word of creation (1.21, 22, 23).” At the same time Allison (*ibid.* 286) considers James’ striking choice of a birth metaphor instead of creation terminology a mere rhetorical issue: “The choice of the verb, it seems, should be explained by a rhetorical desire to set what God does over against what sin does in 1.15.”

<sup>26</sup> The first occurrence of νόμος though is in Jas 1:25.

*Sol.* 16:10; *1 En.* 14:1; 99:2; 104:9f.; *Prov* 22:21 LXX; *Mal* 2:6 LXX which are offered as proof by the supporters of the nomistic understanding of *Jas* 1:18 do not contain the exact phrase λόγος ἀληθείας. Their differing expressions don't clearly refer to the law in each case either.<sup>27</sup> And even though it is possible to compare the λόγος ἔμφυτος in *Jas* 1:21 with notions of God writing the law into men's hearts or putting it near men's mouths and hearts (cf: *Deut* 30:14; *Jer* 31:33, *1QH* 4:10)<sup>28</sup> this doesn't offer sufficient explanation of the birth metaphor here and in *Jas* 1:18a. To be sure, the O.T. calls Israel God's firstborn in some places<sup>29</sup> but there is no single expression of God giving *birth* to Israel through the word of the law.<sup>30</sup> Thus, like the creation-oriented position above, the nomistic view also doesn't offer an explanation of *Jas* 1:18 that takes distinct notice of the net of birth metaphors that span the whole section of *Jas* 1:13–25.

This leaves us with λόγος ἀληθείας most likely referring to the word of the gospel.<sup>31</sup> Also *Col* 1:5; *Eph* 1:13; *2 Cor* 6:7; and *2 Tim* 2:15 attest λόγος ἀληθείας being used for the gospel. Thus, readers could know this expression already even though these other occurrences don't prove without doubt that James is using it in the same way. The three questions from above need to be answered all the same.

Beginning with the last one (c) and looking at the context, readers of the Epistle of James are confronted with the chain of filiations in *Jas* 1:15 which illustrates the unavoidable progression from sin to death (see above 2.). Next *Jas* 1:17 starts to draw a very different picture beginning high above with God, giver of all good gifts, unchangeable and “father of lights”. Then, *Jas* 1:18 brings together the two different “worlds” of down below and high above, of death and light, by assuring the readers that God has given birth to them “through the word of truth”. Thus, death will not be the inevitable end of all sinners, but, with his wilful action (βουληθείς), God contradicts the necessity of the disastrous developments in *Jas* 1:15 and breaks the power of sin. To assume that this fundamental change in life has to do with coming to be a believer in Christ, thereby identifying the λόγος ἀληθείας with the (first) announcement of the gospel, would certainly not be far-fetched.<sup>32</sup> The soteriological meaning proves to be consistent with *Jas* 1:21 as well since here the ability to “save” is directly attached to the word (δέξασθε τὸν ἔμφυτον λόγον τὸν δυνάμενον σῶσαι τὰς ψυχὰς ὑμῶν).<sup>33</sup>

How one is to “receive” something that is already “innate” represents a somewhat strange admonition though. This is the case with each of the three main positions and doesn't only cause a problem with the first soteriological understanding but also with the other two. Yet, the soteriological understanding can at least show that the syntagma of “receiving the word” (τὸν λόγον δέχεσθαι) is attested too in other N.T. writings to describe the receiving of the *gospel* in missionary situations (cf. e.g. *Acts* 8:14; 11:1; 17:11; *1 Thess* 1:6; 2:13). But even though the proceeding admonition (*Jas* 1:21a)

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Konradt, *Existenz*, 69–71, for a critical discussion of all those passages.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Tsuji, *Glaube*, 109.

<sup>29</sup> *Exod* 4:22 LXX; *Jer* 38:9 LXX; *Sir* 36:11 LXX; *Pss. Sol.* 18:4; 4Q504 III,5f.; cf. Ludwig, *Wort*, 157–158.

<sup>30</sup> See more below 4.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. e.g. Burchardt, *Jakobusbrief*, 78–80; Davids, *James*, 89; Dibelius, *Jakobus*, 135–139; Hartin, *James*, 105; Konradt, *Existenz*, 44 passim; McKnight, *James*, 129–132; Popkes, *Jakobus*, 123–127.

<sup>32</sup> This life-giving power of God would also cohere with the notion of the creator-God brought up by the catchwords πατήρ τῶν φώτων (1:17), κτίσματα and βουληθείς (1:18)—see above.

<sup>33</sup> To be sure, also the notion of the “word of truth” as referring to the law would offer a contradiction to the power of sin leading to death. But even though the word of the law is meant to show the way leading to life, it would be unusual to assign to it the ability to save life in a direct manner as it is expressed in *Jas* 1:21 at the end.

to rid oneself of bad behaviours with its use of ἀποτίθεσθαι is also well known in comparable contexts,<sup>34</sup> the combination of ἀποτίθεσθαι and δέχεσθαι in Jas 1:21 and the description of this „word“ as a λόγος ἔμφυτος is singular.<sup>35</sup> The best way to understand it is to identify it as a focal word referring back to the source domain BIRTH and therefore connecting Jas 1:21 with Jas 1:18. There the word has already been introduced as playing an important role during the metaphorical birth of the addresses. “Through the word of truth”, i.e. through coming into contact with the word of the gospel, the readers have become what they are now. Or, to phrase it according to the metaphorical source domain: By being born by God and through the word, this word is innate to them now, it is given to them like a good predisposition<sup>36</sup> granting life to them.<sup>37</sup> But as it is with every predisposition, it needs to be developed and acted out in life to be discernible. That’s what James in 1:21 is trying to motivate his readers to do—to develop those good predispositions which lie in them already and need only to be taken up and put into practical action. By asking them to be “doers of the word” and not only hearers, Jas 1:22 doesn’t demand anything alien or anything which would not be accomplishable of its readers. Throughout Jas 1:18–22, objections against equalling the “word” with the word of the gospel are voiced especially in connection with Jas 1:22 from the point of a nomistic understanding which maintains that the “word” couldn’t be the gospel since one could not “do” the word of the gospel.<sup>38</sup> This might be right if one takes the word of the gospel to be restricted to the salvific message of the death and resurrection of Christ<sup>39</sup> as would be the case in 1 Cor 15,1–4 for instance. But there is no reason why the “word of truth” through which the readers of the Epistle of James became Christ-believers should have contained only references to cross and resurrection but nothing about Jesus’ own preaching and its implications on leading one’s life according to God’s will. Especially when considering the distinct ethical position which James is holding within the corpus of the New Testament writings, such a reduction doesn’t seem appropriate. Rather, the gospel according to the Epistle of James (though there is no attestation of εὐαγγέλιον in the letter at all) would certainly contain aspects of what there is to do for a proper Christian life.

Thus, understanding the “word of truth” in a soteriological way enables a consistent reading of the whole passage and takes into account the special contribution of the source domain BIRTH as well.<sup>40</sup> But questions (a) and (b) have still to be answered. Concerning the reference of “us” in Jas 1:18a (a), the soteriological point of view takes a middle position between the creation-oriented point of view (with “us” referring to all mankind: see above) and the nomistic position (with “us” referring to Jewish believers only: see above) by specifying “us” as Christ-believers with Jewish *and* pagan backgrounds alike. Though, what it means that it is this mixed group of believers who get singled out as “some kind of first-fruit” in Jas 1:18b (b) needs further discussion.

#### 4. “To be some a kind of first-fruit among his creatures” (Jas 1:18b)

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Col 3:8–9; Eph 4:22; Rom 13:12; 1 Pet 2:1; Hebr 12:1.

<sup>35</sup> The adjective ἔμφυτος is a NT *hapax legomenon*; cf. further Kaiser, *Rede*, 375–376.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Konradt, *Existenz*, 79.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Wenger, *Kyrios*, 146.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. e.g. Lautenschlager, *Gegenstand*, 167; Ludwig, *Wort*, 18.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Lautenschlager, *Gegenstand*, 167.

<sup>40</sup> For Jas 1:23–24 see again below (5.).

In a cultic context ἀπαρχή means „firstlings for sacrifice or offering, first-fruits“<sup>41</sup>. But is this the semantic domain which is activated in Jas 1:18b and to what purpose would the addressed people metaphorically be singled out among all creatures? Or, is ἀπαρχή in Jas 1:18b used in a non-metaphorical sense to identify someone as being “the first of a set, often in relation to something being given”<sup>42</sup>? In exegetical discussions on Jas 1:18b the latter non-metaphorical meaning is often uncritically combined with the first cultic meaning. But while being “the first of a set” also takes into view those who will follow and what they will finally *share* with those being first, being singled out for cultic reasons establishes a basic *difference* between the firstlings and the rest from which the firstlings are taken. The two meanings should therefore not be treated as similar options.

If Jas 1:18b would assign the readers to be “the first of a set”, the question is, in what sense they would be first: First to become Christ-believers through the announcement of the word of the gospel? First, perhaps, to be saved from the threat of temptations and sin that otherwise lead to death (cf. Jas 1:15)? In any case, they would be first in comparison to others, most likely to other human beings, who haven’t come to believe in Christ yet (even though κτίσματα in 1:18b could of course refer to all creatures). But the Epistle of James doesn’t show any interest in discussing the fate or hope for the non-believers in the following chapters at all.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, it is indicated to consider the cultic meaning of ἀπαρχή as the appropriate choice. Comparable metaphorical instantiations of the source domain FIRST-FRUITS can be found in Jer 2:3,<sup>44</sup> in Philo, *Spec.* 4,180, and in 1 Clem 29:3.<sup>45</sup> In these three texts of O.T., early Jewish and Christian provenance, it is in each case the Jewish people who are metaphorically called a first-fruit which God has singled out from “the midst of peoples” (1 Clem), respectively from “whole humankind” (Philo), and that God has established a special relationship to.<sup>46</sup> Thus, two main aspects of the source domain FIRST-FRUITS are metaphorically activated in these texts: (1) Firstlings get singled out to be considered God’s share and property. (2) Firstlings are taken out of an entity which they originally belong to. Looking at Jas 1:18b, this enables two possible readings which do not exclude each other: (1) Being singled out as a first-fruit emphasizes the special relationship of the readers to God which is established without any action by the readers since first-fruits don’t do anything themselves to be chosen. (Concerning the passive role of the readers, the first-fruit-metaphor conforms well with the birth metaphor.) (2) Being taken from “among all creatures” as a first-fruit establishes a difference to the world.<sup>47</sup> Those being born by God are still part of all of God’s creatures. However, being singled out makes them different at the same time. In terms of the source domain this difference to the profane world could also be described as being sanctified. Being holy though doesn’t simply mean a status but might imply an active behaviour as well. To be sure, Jas 1:18b with its source domain FIRST-FRUITS doesn’t include this active aspect (see above). But the idea of the readers to *be* God’s holy property in Jas 1:18b finds a coherent continuation in 1:19

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<sup>41</sup> LSJ s.v. ἀπαρχή 2; cf. L&N § 53.23.

<sup>42</sup> L&N § 61.8.

<sup>43</sup> Even an expression like πᾶς ἄνθρωπος in Jas 1:19 is most likely not addressed to “everyone” but to the Christ-believing readers only.

<sup>44</sup> Even though the Septuagint translates תְּבוֹאָהּ in Jer 2:3 with the less specific ἀρχή, the cultic source domain of the metaphorical expression becomes clear by looking at the Masoretic text.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. especially Konradt, *Existenz*, 60f; Wenger, *Kyrios*, 140 n. 833; Burchardt, *Jakobusbrief*, 79f.

<sup>46</sup> Clement goes even further and calls the members of his own Christian group (i.e. those who have been singled out again from the aforementioned ἀπαρχή) the “most holy” (ἅγια ἁγίων, 1 Clem 29:3).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Konradt, *Existenz*, 64; Burchardt, *Jakobusbrief*, 79; Popkes, *Jakobus*, 127.

and the following verses by demanding a kind of behaviour that will make sure that those being singled out as firstlings will *stay* holy as well.<sup>48</sup>

There is still another possible thought which might relate to the use of ἀπαρχή in Jas 1:18b. Referring to the above-mentioned texts, Jer 2:3, Philo, *Spec.* 4,180, and 1 Clem 29:3, some scholars suppose that James is applying an Israel predication to the Christ-believers here.<sup>49</sup> But ἀπαρχή is not specific enough to be identified as a clear-cut Israel predication. Reading it in connection with the birth metaphor in the first part of the verse though opens up interesting trains of thought. In fact, neither Jer 2:3, Philo, *Spec.* 4,180, nor 1 Clem 29:3 explain the special relation between Israel and God by referring to God giving birth to Israel or by highlighting any other kind of child-parent-relation. Yet, there are other O.T. texts that call Israel God's "firstborn" (πρωτότοκος or πρωτόγονος).<sup>50</sup> Only James doesn't use any of these terms. Thus, if the intention would have been to use Israel terminology in 1:18, there would have been more specific terms to choose from. But still, readers might have discovered an allusion to Israel as being God's firstborn in the rather unspecific term ἀπαρχή.

It is notable in any case that the Epistle of James uses ἀπαρχή in the singular form thereby creating a strong sense of group identity among the addressed people (including himself in using "us"). James might have connected the birth metaphor and the first-fruit metaphor and thus he might have purposefully transferred Israel terminology to refer to the new community of Christ-believers in a modified but traditionally well-grounded way. Being born by God doesn't make the readers firstborns of God (this would still be Israel). But through this birth the readers have become "some kind of first-fruit." James declares his audience to be a group of people who are in a special way God's property. He offers a new designation for this group: ἀπαρχή, thereby hinting at typical Israel terminology but not referring to Israel exclusively. Therefore, the metaphorical designations in Jas 1:18 are open to address Christ-believers coming from a Jewish *and* pagan background alike.

## 5. Conclusion: The soteriological basis of the Epistle of James

Looking at the structure, the whole section of Jas 1:13–25 is centered around 1:18 and its noticeable birth metaphor.<sup>51</sup> Taking up the topic of temptations from the section before (cf. 1:2, 12), Jas 1:15 offers the first instantiations of a birth metaphor but, compared to 1:18, he uses the metaphor in a very different way. While according to Jas 1:15 self-procured temptations will inevitably give birth to sin and death, in 1:18a the readers are assured by James of having been born by God and through the "word of truth"—a birth that will lead to life and not to death. Clearly, the beginning of new life is one of the main aspects of the source domain BIRTH which is activated here. This aspect is even more emphasized by the striking contrast to 1:15. By adding λόγω ἀληθείας though, James introduces an element into the text which transcends the source domain BIRTH and points to the extra-textual reality of his readers—namely their becoming Christ-believers through the "word." Both the birth metaphor and mentions of this "word"

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<sup>48</sup> Since the firstlings belong to God, he is entitled to their life. It is *God's* right to demand an appropriate life of those that he has born and chosen to be his firstlings. Therefore, James presents *God's* righteousness (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ, Jas 1:20) as the measure for living.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Burchardt, *Jakobusbrief*, 79; Popkes, *Jakobus*, 127.

<sup>50</sup> Exod 4:22 LXX; Jer 38:9 LXX; Sir 36:11 LXX; *Pss. Sol.* 18:4; 4Q504 III,5f.; cf. Ludwig, *Wort*, 157f.

<sup>51</sup> Johnson calls it "one of the most striking female images for God in the NT" (Johnson, *James*, 197). But as mentioned above (2.), not many scholars pay due attention to this birth metaphor and its impact on understanding the whole section Jas 1:13–25.

reoccur in the next verses and give this whole section its structure. Jas 1:13–25 can be considered to be the “theological foundation”<sup>52</sup> of the whole epistle. At its centre in Jas 1:18 stands the “word of truth.” But this is not only a word that comes from the outside. In fact, James allocates an important role to the word during the metaphorical birth of the readers and characterizes the word as “innate” (1:21). Therefore, we need to come back to the birth metaphors in Jas 1:13–25 a last time to summarize how those metaphors convey the soteriological grounding of the theology of the Epistle of James.

James uses the source domain BIRTH in the first place to express what kind of a change in life people experience when they connect with the “word of truth” and become Christ-believers (1:18a). By designating the readers to become “some kind of first fruit,” Jas 1:18b introduces yet another source domain which seems to differ entirely from BIRTH. Both domains though overlap in one aspect, namely the setting up of relations of ownership: when considering the BIRTH domain, being born means that children are not only related to their parents in a biological way but also socially and legally. For the first century CE, this means that children are regarded the property of their parents. Considering the FIRST-FRUITS domain, firstlings get singled out to be the property of the God to whom they are going to be offered. Looking at Jas 1:18a *and* b, this means that those who were born by God do not only owe their life to God and to the “word of truth” but are assigned to God and destined to be God’s “property” as well. To be sure, again, being God’s “property” through birth and through being singled out among all creatures is something which *happens* to those being addressed by the letter. There is nothing they can do for it in the first place. But one of the consequences of the birth metaphor is that those being born in a passive way will soon face a life which needs to be lived in an active way. If one looks at the verses that follow after Jas 1:18, this aspect of *how to lead this life* increasingly dominates the content of the letter.

But what about the assignment “to be some kind of first-fruit”? Does it fit into this train of thought as well? On a first glance, after having been singled out, firstlings are what they are. The source domain FIRST-FRUIT doesn’t seem to contain any aspect of active behaviour on the side of the firstlings. But, it is important to notice that by singling out the firstlings, they are sanctified and come to be at a well-marked distance to the world of the profane. Thus, for the readers who are being metaphorically assigned “to be first-fruits” it means that it will be *their task* to keep this distance from the rest of the (non-believing) world. James has already made clear how important it is to abide with God and his “word” by taking up the matter of “temptations” in Jas 1:2–4, 13–15. Especially the chain of filiations in Jas 1:15 describes how easily everyone’s own desires can lead into death instead of life. A closer look at the tenses of the verbs expressing birth (present tense in 1:15: τίκτει, ἀποκύει; aorist tense in 1:18: ἀπεκόησεν) reveals that the temptations of Jas 1:13–15 remain a serious peril at their present time, even though they are being “born by God” and through the “word of truth”.

Thus, there is no sure state of salvation that can be gained for all time through the birth by God and through the “word of truth”—or, as Matthias Konradt puts it: “The word is no self-seller that enchants the Christian.”<sup>53</sup> However, the birth metaphor offers reinforcement to the readers: James describes a relationship established by birth that can never be terminated even if the path of life should depart from its origin. According to Jas 1:21, the “word of truth,” that contributed to this birth is “innate” for those

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<sup>52</sup> Konradt, *Jakobusbrief*, 505: “theologische Grundlegung”.

<sup>53</sup> Konradt, *Existenz*, 100: „Das Wort ist kein Selbstläufer, das den Christen verzaubert.“

addressed. The fact that the readers are nevertheless called upon to “receive” (δέχεσθαι) this “word” can be explained in terms of the source domain BIRTH: Those metaphorically born through God and the “word of truth” should not abandon this predisposition but should implement it in their life. Seen in this light, Jas 1:21 is not so much an admonition as it is often assumed. Rather, the imperative δέξασθε conveys an invitation that tries to motivate the readers to simply do what is already predisposed in them.

The story of the man looking into the mirror (Jas 1:23–24) also serves this pragmatic strategy of motivating the readers. The little parable is told to warn the audience of James to be not only “hearers of the word” but “doers” as well. But since it is rather unlikely that a man forgets his looks immediately after he ceases to look into the mirror (see above 2.) the “word” is also something that is not likely to be forgotten and ignored. Or, to phrase it differently—the “face of the origin” (Jas 1:23) is as undetachable to those who God has given birth to through the “word of truth” (1:18), as the “word” is “innate” to them (1:21).

Thus, the Epistle of James doesn’t demand “works” that its readers would not be able to do, but only asks for what is natural to those being born by God. However, this still means for readers to implement those good predispositions into their lives. It remains a main issue of the Epistle of James to appeal for right-doing. Jas 2:17 expresses it in a more familiar way (see above 1.): “Faith, if it has no works, is dead in itself” (ἡ πίστις, ἐὰν μὴ ἔχη ἔργα, νεκρά ἐστὶν καθ’ ἑαυτήν). But this statement should not be misunderstood as unilaterally valuing “works” over “faith.” James doesn’t expect his readers to fulfil those “works”—which have been the cause of manifold charges against the Epistle of James for being “unevangelic”—without assuring his readers in the first place that something is *given* to them which enables them to comply at all. James describes a *precondition* beyond the reader’s own merits that is illustrated by the metaphorical statement in Jas 1:18a in association with 1:21 and 1:23–24. By choosing the source domain BIRTH, the author of the letter succeeds in expressing two aspects at the same time: first the action of God which precedes all actions of the addressed and provides them with an innate positive disposition, and secondly the necessity of acting out those good qualities in life on the part of the readers.

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## Abstract

The Epistle of James is usually well known for its ethical teachings, and not for outstanding soteriological statements. However, this letter doesn’t demand “works” of its readers without reassuring them of an innate capacity which enables them to act according to God’s will. With a striking metaphor God is described as “giving birth” to the readers “through the word of truth” (Jas 1:18). This “word” reoccurs in Jas 1:21 as λόγος ἔμφυτος. It should not—as it is usually done—be translated as “implanted word” but as “innate word.” This translation makes it clear that Jas 1:21 is developing the birth metaphor of 1:18 even further. To “receive the innate word that is able to save you” therefore means that the readers should develop those inner predispositions which God gave them “out of his will” and through “birth” in the first place.