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Betwixt and Between: The Letter of James and the Human Condition

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Abstract: James's letter does not concern itself with the nature of humanity in the abstract. His message regarding the trials of Jewish messianists distributed outside the land of the Jews leads him rather to explore the perplexing paradox of the human predicament—called to faithful life patterns, to love of God and neighbor, on the one hand, overwhelmed by craving and sin, on the other hand. This undergirds a profound analysis of the human condition as well as its remedy in God's true word.

Keywords: theological anthropology, James, temptation, trials, human craving, narrative, hybridity

What might the New Testament letter of James contribute to our understanding of the human situation? As with other questions concerning James's theological significance, the weighty influence of Martin Luther and Martin Dibelius provides little hope that James has much to offer. For Luther, the contributions of Paul, John, and even Peter were welcomed as the "true kernel and marrow of all the [NT] books," because they would "show you Christ" and "teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know." James, though, had "nothing of the nature of the gospel about it."[1] Almost four centuries later, Dibelius was more willing to number James among "the classical documents of Christianity," but acknowledged that it lacks "the force and scope" of "the gospel of Jesus" and is "essentially alien to the spirit manifested in the letters of Paul and in the writings of 'John.'"[2] He portrayed the text of James as a beaded necklace, a cord on which James has strung ethical judgments like charms on a bracelet.[3] Generally, this evaluation of James as a collection of nuggets of practical wisdom suggests that we might turn to James in search of down-to-earth advice but not for theological insight. Ironically, this judgment assumes a segregation of theology and practice that propagates the very division of "hearing the word" and "doing

1 M. Luther, *Word and Sacrament* (ed. E.T. Bachmann) (LW 35; St. Louis, MO: Concordia 1960) I, 362.
2 M. Dibelius, *James. A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (rev. H. Greeven; trans. M.A. Williams; ed. H. Koester) (Hermeneia; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress 1976) 50.
3 Dibelius, *James*, 2–3. Given his contributions otherwise to *formgeschichtliche Studien*, Dibelius's characterization of James may not be surprising.

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the word" James counters. What if we set aside this modernist impulse to divorce theory and practice and, instead, adjust our lenses to recognize theology embedded in practice?[4]

My focus in this essay is James's portrait of the human condition. Admittedly, James neither directly asks nor explicitly answers the anthropological question: What is a human being? Or: What is humanity? This question is rare in Christian Scripture.[5] In varied ways, however, the biblical writers, James among them, carry out their work on the basis of tacit understandings of the human person. As we will see, James does so as he elaborates his practical wisdom in conversation with Gen 1–3. Accordingly, we will attend above all to James's introduction to his letter in chapter 1, and, therefore, to his portrayal of the hybrid nature of human life in the dispersion. I will show that James's understanding of humanity parallels a reading of human origins that emphasizes the profoundly paradoxical nature of humanity, with James emphasizing the dependence of faithful human life on the implanted word of God's good news.

1. Mapping James

Although they differ on myriad details of James's structure, most contemporary interpreters of James designate 1:2–27 as an "introduction," following the typical letter opening in 1:1. An initial reading might lead one to assess this opening section of James's letter as a hodgepodge of wisdom sayings cast as commands, but closer examination reveals word-links and parallels that draw together into a coherent whole what might first appear as isolated directives.[6] Without pressing for agreement on how best to outline James's letter, or even its first chapter, we can nonetheless identify how James begins immediately to locate his audience on a map and to shape their theological imaginations.

If we recall that our identities are shaped and shared through stories told, we are primed to ask how James tells the story of those to whom he addresses this letter. In identity theory, "narrative identity" refers to a person's internalized and evolving story, which provides him or her with a sense of unity across time, purpose, and significance. These stories may be unique at the individualized level, but nonetheless tend to follow patterns and tropes

4 Indeed, recent years have welcomed a revival of interest in James, emphasizing not only the structural coherence of this letter but also its theology; Richard Bauckham's *James. Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage* (New Testament Readings; London: Routledge 1999) marks something of a turning point in this respect.

5 See Pss 8 (cited in Heb 2:6–9); 144; Job 7:17–18—on which see P.D. Miller, "What Is a Human Being? The Anthropology of Scripture," *What about the Soul? Neuroscience and Christian Anthropology* (ed. J.B. Green) (Nashville, TN: Abingdon 2004) 63–73.

6 Cf., e.g., M.E. Taylor, *A Text-Linguistic Investigation into the Discourse Structure of James* (LNTS 311; London: Clark 2006) (see pp. 1–34 for Taylor's survey of a range of proposals); M.E. Taylor – G.H. Guthrie, "The Structure of James," *CBQ* 68/4 (2006) 681–705; C.L. Westfall, "Mapping the Text: How Discourse Analysis Helps Reveal the Way through James," *The Epistle of James. Linguistic Exegesis of an Early Christian Letter* (eds. J.D. Dvorak – Z.K. Dawson) (Linguistic Exegesis of the New Testament 1; Eugene, OR: Pickwick 2019) 11–44.

shared by others within one's community of reference. Not surprisingly, research demonstrates that the life-story a person relates reveals at least as much of the world within which she or he frames meaning as it does of his or her own life.[7] Personal and community identities are narratively constructed, propagated, and preserved. Accordingly, transformation entails a reordering of life in terms of a fresh adaptation of the narrative shared among and told within and by the community.

James locates his brothers and sisters in an overarching narrative with four primary kernels:[8]

Creation → Jesus's Advent → Present, Diasporic Life → Consummation

James's opening chapter alludes to all four, and I will comment briefly on each, beginning with Jesus's advent.

(1) Jesus's Advent. In 1:1, James identifies himself as a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, and to this reference we may add the less explicit but nonetheless pervasive use of Jesus's teaching as subtext for much of the letter,[9] not least in James's dual emphasis on double-love: loving God, loving neighbor. James also highlights the significance of Jesus's advent in 2:1: "My brothers and sisters, do not hold the faithfulness of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ together with acts of favoritism."[10] In these references to Jesus, James underscores allegiance to Jesus and his way (developed in the letter especially in terms of his interpretation of Torah).

(2) Diasporic Life and Its Trials. At the outset, James greets "the twelve tribes who are in the diaspora" and, we quickly learn, these "brothers and sisters" are to find the greatest happiness in "the various trials" they encounter (1:1–2). Read in isolation, "the twelve tribes" could refer metaphorically to Israel. Following James's acclamation of Jesus as Lord and Christ, though, James's use of this phrase presses in the direction of *Israel, whose hope has*

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7 D.P. McAdams, "Narrative Identity," *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research* (eds. S.J. Schwartz – K. Luyckx – V.L. Vignoles) (New York: Springer 2011) I, 99–115; S.P. Reyna, *Connections. Brain, Mind, and Culture in Social Anthropology* (London: Routledge 2002).

8 I borrow the term "kernel" from Seymour Chatman's classic work, *Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1978): "nodes or hinges in the structure, branching points which force a narrative into one or two (or more) possible paths" (53). I am adapting material first published in J.B. Green, "Reading James Missionally," *Reading the Bible Missionally* (ed. M.W. Goheen) (The Gospel and Our Culture Series; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2016) 194–212; J.B. Green, "Original Sin: A Wesleyan View," *Original Sin and the Fall. Five Views* (eds. J. Stump – C. Meister) (Spectrum Multiview Books; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic 2020) 55–77.

9 For a list of allusions and discussion, see D.C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of James* (ICC; New York: Bloomsbury 2013) 56–62; cf., e.g., J.S. Kloppenborg, "The Reception of the Jesus Tradition in James," *The Catholic Epistles and the Tradition* (ed. J. Schlosser) (BETL 176; Leuven: Peeters 2004) 91–139; J.S. Kloppenborg, "The Emulation of the Jesus Tradition in the Letter of James," *Reading James with New Eyes. Methodological Reassessments of the Letter of James* (eds. R.L. Webb – J.S. Kloppenborg) (LNTS 342; London: Clark 2007) 121–150; P.J. Hartin, *James and the 'Q' Sayings of Jesus* (JSNTSup 47; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1991). On the significance of this material for James's Christology, see W.R. Baker, "Christology in the Epistle of James," *EvQ* 74/1 (2002) 47–57.

10 Unless otherwise indicated, translations of biblical materials are my own.

been restored in Jesus's coming. In other words, James participates in and addresses a Jewish restorationist movement, Jewish messianists. For some, the mental image of *diaspora* might invoke portraits of a people torn from their homeland, a vale of tears for the displaced. Others recognize that, by the first century CE, the Jewish diaspora was a more established amalgamation of forced and voluntary migration, lacking for most the angst typically accompanying refugee status. Even if experiences of diaspora varied and even if few Jewish expatriates seem compelled to return to the homeland, the evidence still suggests persistent koinonia with the homeland (say, participation in the temple tax) and, outside the homeland, patterns of Jewish adaptation and resistance, as well as patterns of anti-Jewish attitudes and behavior. Those patterns of resistance centered on such peculiar commitments and practices as circumcision, diet, and sabbath-keeping.[11] Even for those comfortably settled in their diasporic homes, questions of identity and life patterns remain for Jews living outside the homeland. James seems little concerned with external forces except insofar as external, worldly dispositions and patterns of life—such as arrogance, favoritism, and violence—might be internalized among Christ-followers. He never mentions struggles involving circumcision, diet, and sabbath-keeping, presumably because these practices could be taken for granted among his audience. Instead, his precis of the law of liberty, the perfect law, centers on neighborly love (1:25; 2:8–13; 4:11). James's "royal law" (βασιλικός) thus tracks with Jesus's proclamation of God's royal rule (βασιλεία), with its emphasis on double-love: love of God, love of neighbor. And this is the banner under which we learn to make sense of James's concerns with his audience's diasporic lives. How might they respond in their encounters with various trials (1:2–3, 12), distress among society's vulnerable (1:27), worldly contamination (1:27), conflicts and disputes (4:1), deceit (5:4), unjust verdicts (5:6), murder (5:6), and the potential of drifting away from the truth (5:19)? James, then, imagines a distributed audience threatened by assimilation into patterns of life alien to the way of faithfulness toward God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

(3) Consummation. Explicit references to the eschaton are limited, even if the eschatological horizon of the narrative identity James wants to inculcate in his audience pervades the letter.[12] Among the plain references to the end time, the first two share parallel references to God's promise to those who love God:

> Truly happy are those who endure testing for, having proven themselves, they will receive the garland of life [God] has promised to those who love him. (1:12)
>
> My dear brothers and sisters, listen! Has God not chosen the poor according to worldly standards to be rich in terms of faith, and to be heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him? (2:5)

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11 See, e.g., E.S. Gruen, *Diaspora. Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2002); J.M.G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora. From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1996) (on circumcision, diet, and sabbath, see pp. 428–442); L.H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World. Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1993) (on circumcision, diet, and sabbath, see pp. 153–170).

12 Cf. T.C. Penner, *The Epistle of James and Eschatology. Re-reading an Ancient Christian Letter* (JSNTSup 121; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1996).

James's eschatological vision thus rests in God's promise and God's choice. And the parallel phrases shared by these two texts suggest that the "kingdom" is, for James, to be identified as future life with God characterized as a reversal of fortunes. Of course, this does not mean that James's eschatological vision is relegated to or concerns only the future. As James's rhetoric makes clear, his vision—and its valuation of the lowly and impoverished—casts its shadow backward on present, diasporic life. James asks, "Has God not chosen the poor?," not "Will God not choose the poor?" (2:5). The "royal law"—"Love your neighbor as yourself"—is a directive for present life (2:8). Crucially, too, this eschatological reversal of fortune is the consequence of divine judgment, a motif that resurfaces in James's final chapter:

> Therefore, brothers and sisters, you must be patient as you wait for the coming of the Lord.... You also must wait patiently, strengthening your resolve, because the coming of the Lord is near. Do not complain about each other, brothers and sisters, so that you will not be judged. Look! The judge is standing at the door! (5:7–9)

Here James correlates the Lord's eschatological arrival (παρουσία) with divine judgment, a motif signaled earlier in 4:12: "There is only one lawgiver and judge, and he is able to save and to destroy. But you who judge your neighbor, who are you?" James's eschatological horizons preclude the possibility that justice might result from human protestations against human behavior, though without offering human passivity in their stead. Humans are called to courageous endurance (μακροθυμέω, μακροθυμία) while recognizing that justice-making is God's work. Who is the coming judge? Does Jesus return in order to judge, or does God come in judgment? Given James's high Christology, it is unclear that a choice is necessary.

James's end-time focus falls on the existential situation of his audience. Diasporic life should occasion growth toward maturity (1:2). Their response is to be one of faithful resistance, not retaliation, as they live their lives in dependence on the God who will act to set things right.

(*4) Creation.* Jesus's advent, present diasporic life, and the eschaton all mark the theological narrative James identifies in this opening chapter. The fourth kernel of James's story, his reflections on creation, takes centerstage in Jas 1, however. This is noteworthy because stories about beginnings (cosmology) and endings (eschatology) are especially important for understanding God's nature, God's engagement with the world, and relationships among God's creatures.

How does James signal his interest in Gen 1–3? He refers to "the Father of Lights," which recalls God's work in the creation of light and of heavenly bodies that illumine the earth (Jas 1:17; Gen 1:3–5, 14–18). James's claim that "every good gift" comes from God evokes God's affirmation of creation's goodness (Jas 1:17; Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). He ends the paragraph that runs from 1:12 to 1:18 with his reference to "everything God created" (1:18).[13] The problem of testing raised in Jas 1 has James reflecting on Gen 3, even if he

13 κτίσμα: "what was created"—cf. Wis 9:2; 13:5; 14:11; 1 Tim 4:4; Rev 5:13; 8:9.

does not mention Adam and Eve by name.[14] Reading further in the letter, we hear a further echo of the creation account in Genesis when James takes up his concerns with the tongue: "With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we denounce human beings made in God's likeness (ὁμοίωσις)" (3:9). James's use of the rare word ὁμοίωσις recalls Gen 1:26–27: God made humanity "according to our image and likeness (ὁμοίωσις)" (LXX). In such ways, James draws on the opening chapters of Genesis to characterize God, to lay out his understanding of the human condition, and to ground his call for ethical comportment. We return to this narrative kernel shortly.

2. The Challenge of Hybridity

Even with the narrative map we have identified, the question remains: Where are James's brothers and sisters, those to whom he addresses this letter? It is tempting to reply that they are "betwixt and between," using an Old English phrase with Germanic roots signifying "neither here nor there." In fact, this is his diagnosis of the problem: Friend of God or friend of the world? Within the community of Christ-followers or outside of it? Embracing heavenly wisdom or earthly? Neither here nor there—betwixt and between. James uses his own language for this when he refers to the *doubleminded* (1:8; 4:8): the self at variance with itself, the self wavering between competing allegiances and alliances, the self tugged in different directions.

Betwixt and between, doubleminded—in contemporary parlance, James sketches a situation marked by *hybridity*. James identifies the character of diasporic testing in relation to power and privilege, with deep roots in judgments concerning status honor (e.g., 1:9–11; cf. ch. 2!). Distributed outside of the land of the Jews, these Christ-followers experience perhaps all the more strongly the realities of their hybrid existence—their identities and life patterns pulled both toward service of Roman ways and in a counter-direction, namely, toward service of the Lord Jesus Christ. Generally, *hybridity* refers to the combination of previously discrete cultural influences in fresh cultural expressions. Accordingly, K. Jason Coker's postcolonial analysis regards James's approach to the situation his audience faces as a failure. Indeed, "in-between places of hybridity repulse James," who attempts to substitute for the Roman empire his own imperial community, according to Coker.[15] This is because, Coker maintains, James presses for single-minded faithfulness to one cultural influence rather than encouraging negotiation among and creative integration of rival life patterns. This is a problematic reading of James, however, since it confuses singlemindedness (i.e., James's call for a single-minded allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ) with a nativist

14 So also, e.g., R.P. Martin, *James* (WBC 48; Waco, TX: Word 1988) 36.

15 K.J. Coker, "Nativism in James 2.14–26: A Post-colonial Reading," *Reading James with New Eyes. Methodological Reassessments of the Letter of James* (eds. R.L. Webb – J.S. Kloppenborg) (LNTS 342; London: Clark 2007) 47.

rejection of hybridity, a nostalgic desire to reclaim a past purity.[16] More apt is Ingeborg Mongstad-Kvammen's postcolonial reading of James. She recognizes that the life patterns that concern James cannot be negotiated or creatively transformed; they are simply irreconcilable with following Christ. The choice is between acting vis-à-vis the lowly and impoverished according to God's standards or according to Roman standards.[17] For her, James's concern with hybridity does not prohibit interactions and engagement with the Roman world, but sets out the basic commitments and dispositions that would characterize lives of faithfulness in the Roman world.

James's approach is congruous with the map he has drawn, with four nodes (or kernels) that determine the direction and parameters of the theological narrative by which he identifies and forms both his message and, by extension, his audience. *Creation* speaks both of God's capacious goodness and of the enduring moral ramifications of the God-likeness characteristic of fellow human beings. *Consummation* speaks of the reversal by which the rapacious rich are overcome with miseries and the lowly are vindicated—not by human initiative (and certainly not by violent words and violent actions that disrupt and destroy human community) but through divine judgment. *Jesus's advent* speaks of single-minded allegiance to Jesus as Lord, proscribing patterns of belief and behavior that counter the message and example of the Lord Jesus Christ concerning double-love. Following Jesus as a *dispersed, not-at-home people* refuses every hint, even the whiff of acts of favoritism toward the wealthy and well-positioned at the expense of the lowly and impoverished (cf. 2:1). James does not call his brothers and sisters to life in an ethnic or religious enclave removed from the reach of the Roman empire; rather, he sets out the terms by which his brothers and sisters might engage with and make their lives in the Rome's world.

Indeed, Israel's basic affirmation, the *Shema*, ties oneness of commitment to the oneness of God. God is one ("The Lord your God, the Lord is one") and Israel shall love the one God singularly ("with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength," Deut 6:4–5). James is very much concerned with this singleness of commitment (1:12; 2:5, 19), and recognizes when it is compromised by the double-hearted, double-faced, double-tongued, or, as here, the doubleminded.[18] For James, it is God's nature to give single-heartedly, simply, to those who ask without wavering, but these people, the doubleminded, are complex in their dueling compulsions (1:6–8). Accordingly, we are unsurprised later to hear James liken them, inconceivably, to fountains from which pour both fresh and salty water (3:9–12).

16 For an alternative (and important) assessment of James's theology of purity, see D. Lockett, *Purity and Worldview in the Epistle of James* (LNTS 366; London: Clark 2008).

17 I. Mongstad-Kvammen, *Toward a Postcolonial Reading of the Epistle of James. James 2:1–13 in Its Roman Imperial Context* (BIS 119; Leiden: Brill 2013) e.g., 146–147.

18 Cf. Ps 12:2; 1 Chr 12:33. For related texts, see L.L. Cheung, *The Genre, Composition and Hermeneutics of James* (Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs; Carlisle: Paternoster 2003) 197–201; Allison, *James*, 186–191.

3. Trials for a Betwixt-and-Between People

With his identification of his audience as a dispersed people experiencing trials, James activates the pervasive scriptural motif that God's aims for humanity include putting pressure on them so that they might flourish.[19] The term James uses, πειρασμός, can signify *trials* (a morally neutral term), but also *testing* (which promotes human development and flourishing) and *tempting* (which thwarts human growth and crushes life).[20] All experience *trials* in the diaspora; *trials* morph into *temptation* when people respond poorly. James presses this point home when he claims that *temptations* have their root in human craving, not in God. Moral failure cannot be traced to external pressures alone. God cannot be blamed.

Working within the wider biblical tradition, James has only three choices in his reflections on temptation's etiology: God, Satan, or human beings. He rejects the first (1:13), does not here mention the second, and advocates for the third: "Everyone is tempted by their own cravings, lured away and seduced by them" (1:14). As John Wesley concludes in his notes on James, "We are therefore to look for the cause of every sin, *in*, not *out of*, ourselves."[21]

True, Nicholas Ellis has recently tried to recast the cosmic drama in James so as to make room for a satanic agent, a cosmic tempter, at work in human testing.[22] His is a well-crafted argument, accounting for ancient Jewish reflection on Adam, Abraham, and Job within a legal drama set on mitigating God's responsibility for temptation. For Ellis, by implicitly engaging the story of Adam (1:13–18) and explicitly drawing on the examples of Abraham (2:21–24) and Job (5:11), and by referring to diabolic presence and influence later in his letter (2:19; 3:6, 14–15; 4:7), James participates in that tradition. However, it can hardly escape our notice that, when James pointedly takes up the problem of testing in Jas 1, diabolic forces go without mention and the devil himself is absent; discussion of Abraham and Job in James is not concerned with a cosmic legal drama, but Abraham is presented as a model of faith-at-work while Job exemplifies courageous endurance; Abraham is actually paired with Rahab and not with Job;[23] and, when James traces the etiology of temptation, he refers explicitly

19 J. Goldingay, *Biblical Theology. The God of the Christian Scriptures* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic 2016) 177; cf. R.W.L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith. A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000) esp. 238–242.

20 Moberly, *Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 239–240. James uses πειρασμός (1:2, 12), its verbal form, πειράζω (1:13 [3x], 14), and, speaking of God, ἀπείραστος (1:13).

21 J. Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth 1976 [1754]) 857.

22 N.J. Ellis, *The Hermeneutics of Divine Testing. Cosmic Trials and Biblical Interpretation in the Epistle of James and Other Jewish Literature* (WUNT 2/396; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2015); cf. N.J. Ellis, "A Theology of Evil in the Epistle of James: Cosmic Trials and the Dramatis Personae of Evil," *Evil in Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity* (eds. C. Keith – L.T. Stuckenbruck) (WUNT 2/417; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2016) 262–281.

23 On James's references to Abraham, Rahab, and Job, cf. J.B. Green, "'I'll Show You My Faith' (James 2:18): Inspiring Models for Exilic Life," *Int* 74/4 (2020) 344–352; and, more fully, R.J. Foster, *The Significance of Exemplars for the Interpretation of the Letter of James* (WUNT 2/376; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2014).

to "their *own* cravings" (emphasis added). In the end, James bears witness to a pessimistic anthropology, not an active diabolic agent, as he reflects on temptation's origins.

James begins his explanation of trials with reference to God, speaking of God's character, first, as a way to trace temptation's origins not to God but to the human condition (1:13–15). Human response is key, with *trials* functioning like a "Y" in the road, with one fork (*testing*) leading to flourishing, happiness, life, and the other fork (*tempting*) leading to stunted growth, decline, death. James's gloomy portrait of the human condition seems to allow no room for optimism around human flourishing. He speaks of God's character, second, in order to introduce welcome words concerning God's medicant for healing the human condition (1:16–18).

How does James develop this perspective? He turns to the opening chapters of Genesis. James's interest in the etiology of sin has roughly contemporaneous analogues in other Jewish literature. For example, in Life of Adam and Eve, Adam and Eve, expelled from Eden, try to explain suffering and pain; sin's roots, we learn, are nourished by the poison of insatiable craving. Similarly, for 2 Esdras, Adam was burdened with an evil inclination, a predisposition toward evil that continues to exercise overwhelming influence on all humanity. In these discussions, clearly, ongoing reflection on the opening chapters of Genesis is important. We have already seen that James reflects on Gen 1–3 in his introduction.

Interestingly, then, Gordon McConville proposes that we read the two creation accounts in Gen 1–3 side by side rather than sequentially.[24] If we follow McConville, we gain a stronger sense of James's portrait of the human situation. This is because Genesis, on this reading, does not recount the story of humanity's loss of God's image (and James certainly does not regard God's likeness as having been lost—cf. 3:9) but rather exposes the perplexing riddle of the human situation. Accordingly, the opening chapters of Genesis do not describe the path from Paradise to Paradise Lost. Rather, Genesis juxtaposes the promise and the peril of humanity. Genesis 1:1–2:4a has God creating humanity in God's own image, so that human beings are "like God." Genesis 2:4b–3:24 has human beings seeking, misguidedly, to be "like God." McConville writes: "Genesis 1–3, therefore, depicts the human condition in its conflicted relation to good and evil, life and death," with "humans … entrusted with presencing God in the world yet … subject to a fatal misreading of what this means as subjective reality."[25] The life of human beings, from this vantage point, is deeply (and frustratingly) paradoxical. They are like God yet misconstrue the possibilities and limitations of Godlikeness. This is precisely the situation we find in James. On the one hand, Jas 1 speaks to the optimism of true happiness, confidence, faith, and life with God. On the other hand, Jas 1 bears witness to the overpowering burden of human craving. Genesis 1–3 sets side by side contrasting portraits of human life. So does Jas 1.

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24 J.G. McConville, *Being Human in God's World. An Old Testament Theology of Humanity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2016).

25 McConville, *Being Human*, 41, 43.

For James, though, left to themselves, human hearts lean toward doublemindedness, favoritism, wrong speaking, arrogance, selfish ambition, and violence—that is, toward earthly wisdom and its relational expression (cf. 3:14–16). Note that James opened his letter with a chain of effects (1:2–4):

trials → endurance → wholeness in "the greatest happiness"

And he soon adds a parallel (1:12):

trials → endurance as an expression of love → life

Both of these contrast with the chain of effects by which James exposes the human condition (1:14–15):

cravings → trials → sin → death

James thus gets at the source of his audience's real difficulties: the potency of their internal inclinations. The term I have translated as *craving*, ἐπιθυμία, can have the more neutral sense of *desire*, but in moral discourse it generally carries the negative sense of *evil desire*.[26] Here, its role vis-à-vis sin and death qualifies it plainly as negative and places it in the company of the wider notion of the evil inclination. Accordingly, genuine happiness and a garland of life seem forever out of reach. We can almost hear the words of 2 Esdras:

> What benefit is it to us that we are promised an immortal time, but we have done works that bring death? What good is it to us that everlasting hope has been predicted for us, but we have utterly failed? What good is it that safe and healthy dwelling places are reserved, but we have behaved badly? (7:119–121 Common English Bible)

What James sketches may seem even more damning, however, since he writes as though "what we have done" was practically inevitable, given our subjugation to our own, overpowering cravings. With good reason, later Christian thought about "original sin" might be recast in terms of "human misery."[27]

Happily, even if the evil inclination that plagues all humans is indeed powerful, it need not be all-powerful. We can follow the logic of James's counterproposal by setting side by side two genealogies:[28]

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26 ἐπιθυμία (1:14, 15). For related language, cf. ἡδονή ("pleasure") in 4:1, 3; ἐπιθυμέω ("I desire," "I crave") in 4:2; and, with a different sense, ἐπιποθέω ("I long for") in 4:5. Cf. L.T. Johnson, *The Letter of James. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 37A; New York: Doubleday 1995) 193–194.

27 V.-M. Kärkkäinen, *A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World.* III. *Creation and Humanity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2015) 387–425.

28 Cf. T.B. Cargal, *Restoring the Diaspora. Discursive Structure and Purpose in the Epistle of James* (SBLDS 144; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press 1993) 85.

Jas 1:15	Jas 1:18
Human desire (or craving)	God's desire (or choice),
"conceives" and "gives birth to sin"	"to give us birth by means of his true word"
"sin, once it reaches adulthood, gives birth to death"	"so that we might be a kind of foretaste of what would become of everything he created"

Both lineages employ images of the birthing room, the one for the process from craving to death, the other for the process whereby God restores human beings to their vocation as bearers of the divine image. In this way, James can speak of these lowly Christ-followers—who have been given birth by God's true word, who love God, and who demonstrate their allegiance to God through courageous endurance amid trials—as a kind of outpost of the consummation of God's plan.

Here is James's solution: the gift of God's "true word"—internalized, welcomed, and practiced. God's remedy for the perplexing human situation is God's true word—the means by which God's people are enabled to share in God's life and to emulate God's fidelity. James does not specify the content of this "true word," but his use of creation motifs suggests a meaningful parallel between God's word in creation (Gen 1: "God said ...") and God's word in the birth that leads to embodying and signifying new creation.

"Birth" and "true word"—this is the language of the good news that opens the way to the transformation that overcomes the human proclivity to sin.[29] Or, to put it differently, the implanted word of God's good news reinvigorates the journey of diasporic life that promotes courageous faithfulness in the midst of trials, so that courageous faithfulness leads to true happiness and the garland of life.

Conclusion

James does not concern himself in this letter with the hypothetical question: What is humanity? His theological-anthropological questions are grounded, rather, in the situation of his audience, his brothers and sisters, who are caught between rival versions of life. Distributed outside the land of the Jews, confronted with pressures to conform attendant to life

29 Cf., e.g., P.H. Davids, *The Epistle of James. A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1982) 89–90; M. Konradt, *Christliche Existenz nach dem Jakobusbrief. Eine Studie zu seiner soteriologischen und ethischen Konzeption* (SUNT 22; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1998) 41–100; Cheung, *Genre*, 86–87. For "true word," cf. Eph 1:13; Col 1:5; 2 Tim 2:15. On the conversionary image of "(new) birth," see John 3:3, 7; 1 Pet 1:3, 23; 2:2; Titus 3:5 (see especially 1 Pet 1:23–24, which parallels Jas 1:10–11, 18 in its use of Isa 40: "having been given new birth not from perishable seed but imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God—since 'all humanity is like grass and all human glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower falls off, but the word of the Lord endures forever.' This is the word that was proclaimed to you as good news").

scattered among the Romans, will their allegiances and life patterns take the forms offered by Rome, with its assumptions and practices concerning wealth and status? Or will their allegiances and life patterns emulate the message and example of Jesus Christ the Lord, with its focus on double-love? James will not allow his audience to blame God for their present predicament. Their failings are of their own making, the outgrowth of their own inclinations, their own cravings. This is nothing more than the frustratingly paradoxical reality of human life—displayed in Gen 1–3 and, again, in Jas 1. For James, humans are caught between hope, faithfulness, and love, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, craving, sin, and death. If James's brothers and sisters cannot indict God for their quandary, though, James does point to God as having opened the way out. His theological narrative includes four kernels, or nodes, that order the nature of faithful life before God and also map the way of human transformation as it moves from creation by means of God's word to consummation by means of that same word, the true word. This is the good news by which God's people are enabled to pattern their lives after God's fidelity, to love God, and to practice "devotion that is pure and unsullied in God the Father's eyes" (1:27).

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