

Can the “Father of Lights” Give Birth?

J. DAVID MILLER

Regular readers of *PRISCILLA PAPERS* will be familiar with those standard biblical texts one points to when discussing feminine imagery for God. We read, for example, of God extending a mother’s care in Isaiah 66:13, “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you” (NRSV). Similarly, Jesus longs to offer such comfort and protection in Matthew 23:37 (also in Luke 13:24), “Jerusalem, Jerusalem...How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings” (NRSV).¹ In addition to motherly comfort, other common texts speak of God nursing and giving birth (e.g., Num. 11:12; Deut. 32:18; Isa. 42:14).

The imagery of giving birth also occurs in a less common text.

The text is less common for a specific and important reason—namely, its imagery has often been suppressed in the copying and translating of scripture. The verse is James 1:18, which, together with verse 17, is provided below:

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. (NRSV)

The word translated “gave birth” is *apokueō*. A quick check of lexicons reveals the word’s core meaning as “give birth to.”² Passive forms can refer to the child—“to be born.”³ The shorter *kueō*, which is absent from the Greek Bible, means to “bear in the womb, be pregnant with.”⁴ Passive forms of *kueō* can refer to an embryo or fetus.⁵ Thus, the prefixed preposition *apo* (“from”) moves the word from “be pregnant” to “give birth.” The less common cognate *kuō* means “to conceive.”⁶ It is absent from the New Testament, but occurs twice in the Septuagint (Isa. 59:4, 13).

Of the three words defined above (*apokueō*, *kueō*, *kuō*), the one which occasionally shifts to the male contribution in reproduction is *kuō*, which in the aorist can be translated “impregnate.”⁷ Does James teach that God “impregnated us,” perhaps reflecting the view that a father’s descendants are present in his loins and he implants them into the mother (see, for example, Heb. 7:9–10)? Surely not. In James 1:18 the accusative direct object “us” and the following clause (“so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures” [NRSV]) clearly eliminate this possibility. While such a scenario would make God the father, it would also make James and his readers (“us”) both the mother and the children

(“first fruits”). In any case, the word in question is *apokueō*, not *kuō*, and it is clearly not appropriate to translate a word based on a secondary meaning of a cognate word.

The verb, *apokueō*, occurs twice in the first chapter of James (1:15, 18). It is otherwise absent from the Greek Bible (though present in the non-canonical 4 Maccabees 15:17, “O woman, who alone gave birth to such complete devotion!” [NRSV]). In James

1:15 it is in a sequence that moves logically from desire, to temptation, to conception, to birth, to death: “But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully

grown, gives birth to death” (1:14–15, NRSV, italics added).

Several modern translations, however, remove this birth language from verse 18, perhaps deeming it an inappropriate metaphor for God. The ASV (1901), RSV (1946), NASB (1960), NKJV (1982), and ESV (2001) veil the metaphor’s birth imagery by translating the verb, *apokueō*, with the clause, “he brought us forth.” Each of these five versions, however, maintains the birth imagery when the same word occurs a few sentences earlier in verse 15. James Moffatt (1913) keeps the birth imagery but distances it from God by making the verb passive, “that we should be born.” J. B. Phillips (1958) both removes the birth imagery from the subject and introduces masculine language for the object, “he made us his own sons.” *The Living Bible* (1971) paraphrases with “he gave us our new lives,” and the *New Living Translation* (1996) has “he chose to make us his own children.” Happily, some more recent translations have not dismissed the natural meaning of the verb, *apokueō*. The NRSV (1989) has “he gave us birth,” and both NIV (1973) and TNIV (2002) translate, “He chose to give us birth.”

Translators are not alone; the New Testament manuscript tradition similarly bears a tendency to dismiss the birth imagery from James 1:18. Perhaps the natural and feminine connotations of *apokueō* were objectionable to some scribes. These scribes instead passed on to us a text with the more generic *poieō*, “make,” which they apparently considered a more suitable activity for “the Father of lights.” Twenty-two Greek manuscripts from the eleventh through the sixteenth centuries, as well as the seventh-century revision of the Syriac Bible prepared by Thomas of Harkel, read “he made us” rather than “he gave birth to us” at James 1:18. Not surprisingly, none of these manuscripts, Greek or Syriac, eliminates the birth metaphor from James 1:15.⁸

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Having noted *what* happened, it is also important to ask *why* it happened. Why have numerous scribes and translators avoided mention of God metaphorically giving birth in James 1:18?

One possible reason is the mention of God as “Father of lights” in James 1:17. Perhaps the shift from paternal title to maternal metaphor seemed too abrupt to some scribes and translators, and they therefore took liberties with the text. Other New Testament passages display similarly inverted metaphors. In Galatians 4:19, for example, in one sentence Paul is first a father (“My little children”), then Paul is a mother in labor (“for whom I am again suffering birth pains”), and finally Christ himself is in the womb of Paul’s readers (“until Christ is formed in you”). These abrupt shifts of metaphor, however, have not resulted in scribal or translational oddities like those at James 1:18.

Another possible reason is that some translators have detected a botanical metaphor in James 1:17–18. “From above” speaks of the sky, while “heavenly lights” and “shifting shadows” suggest the sun and its movement. Perhaps sunshine or rain is “coming down.” The word in question, *apokueō*, then refers to the maturing of plants which become “first fruits.” Indeed, *kueō* (though not *apokueō*) is used of the flowering of plants.⁹ Given such a context, translating *apokueō* “produce” or “bring forth” is not inappropriate. It is not, however, the reading that most naturally suggests itself. It should be noted that no Greek manuscript has changed *apokueō* to a word with a more clearly botanical semantic domain than *poieō*, such as *akmazō* (“ripen”), *blastanō* (“sprout”), or *phuō* (“grow”).¹⁰

A more probable reason for opting against the birth metaphor is the discomfort some scribes and translators have for a feminine image of God. In other contexts as well, textual criticism has provided the vantage point for observing the marginalization of women by scribes and translators.¹¹

One irony that makes this marginalizing especially striking is its preservation by those who claim a high commitment to the literal rendering of scripture. In the ancient world, for example, the above-mentioned Syriac revision of the New Testament prepared by Thomas of Harkel in the early seventh century is clearly intend-

ed as an ultra-literal representation of the Syriac and Greek texts available to the reviser.¹² Thomas certainly had access to manuscripts attesting *apokueō*, “give birth”—in fact, all extant Greek manuscripts from the time of Thomas support this reading (the variant *poieō*, “make,” is unknown until the eleventh century).

Similarly, in more recent times the English Standard Version has shrouded the birth imagery of James 1:18 with the translation, “he brought us forth.” The translators nevertheless make the following claim:

The ESV is an “essentially literal” translation that seeks as far as possible to capture the precise wording of the original text...As such, its emphasis is on “word-for-word” correspondence.... Thus it seeks to be transparent to the original text, letting the reader see as directly as possible the structure and meaning of the original...As an essentially literal translation, then, the ESV seeks to carry over every possible nuance of meaning in the original words of Scripture into our own language.¹³

In conclusion, we do well to remind ourselves that metaphors mirror meaning and imagery influences interpretation. It is, therefore, the responsibility of those who bring scripture into modern hands and minds to take these metaphors and images seriously. In the case of James 1:18—where the Father of lights gives birth—this responsibility has too often been avoided.

About the Author



J. DAVID MILLER lives with his family of four in Johnson City, Tenn., where he is active at Grandview Christian Church. He teaches New Testament and youth ministry at Milligan College. He received an M.Div. from Emmanuel School of Religion, also near Johnson City, and a Ph.D. in Biblical Interpretation offered jointly by The University of Denver and Iliff School of Theology. His research interests include textual criticism and women in Scripture.

Endnotes

1. Compare 4 Esd. 1:28–30, “Thus says the Lord Almighty: Have I not entreated you as a father entreats his sons or a mother her daughters or a nurse her children, so that you should be my people and I should be your God, and that you should be my children and I should be your father? I gathered you as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But now, what shall I do to

you? I will cast you out from my presence” (NRSV).

2. See, for example, Frederick W. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 114.

3. H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (New York: Oxford, 1996), 205.

4. *Ibid.*, 1005.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, 1015.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Institute for New Testament Textual Research, ed., *Novum Testamentum Graecum: Editio Critica Maior*, vol. 4: *Catholic Letters*, Installment 1: *James*, 2 parts (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997), 12, 14.

9. Theophrastus, *Historia Plantarum*, 6.4.8.

10. See other possibilities in Johannes P. Louw, Eugene A. Nida, et al., eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 23.188–23.204.

11. See, for example, Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes, eds., *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 367–68; Eldon J. Epp, “Text-Critical, Exegetical, and Socio-Cultural Factors Affecting the Junia/Junias Variation in Romans 16.7,” in *New Testament Textual Criticism and Exegesis: Festschrift J. Delobel*, ed. A. Denaux (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002), 227–91; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 699–708; Ben Witherington, “The Anti-Feminist Tendencies of the ‘Western’ Text in Acts,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (1984): 82–84.

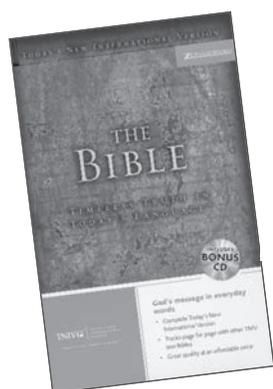
12. “The chief characteristic of the Harclean version is its slavish adaptation to the Greek...” Bruce M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 69.

13. J. I. Packer, ed., *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, Containing the Old and New Testaments* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001). See also http://www.esv-bibles.com/esv_bible_translation.html.

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