

**The Necessity of Spiritual Birth:**

**An Examination of John 3:1-8**

Jacob Neiderhiser.

NT620: New Testament Exegesis 2.

2/16/24

John Chapter 3 is home to some of the most well-known verses in Bible. However, a high degree of familiarity does not always mean a high degree of clarity. In fact, Gerald Borchert writes, “Although John has great verses that epitomize many of the great realities of the Christian faith, the gospel must not be thought to be a simple book. Many of its theological formulations press even the best of Christian minds just as Jesus pressed Nicodemus to consider a new depth of reality involving truth and salvation.”<sup>1</sup> This paper will press readers to consider a new depth of spiritual truth by offering a verse-by-verse exegesis of the first 8 verses in John 3 focusing on textual and contextual issues with a focus on the original language to argue the thesis that: In the first portion of John Chapter 3, Jesus’s primary purpose is to confront the fatal flaw of Nicodemus understanding of salvation by teaching him the absolute necessity of the new spiritual birth, which only comes by faith in Jesus the Christ. This paper will do so by showing that verse 3 is best translated “born from above/from God” and that in verse 5 when Jesus says, “born of water and of the Spirit” he is simply repeating what he said in verse 3 then elaborating on the same truth.

This paper will go section by section looking first at the general context of the passage, showing its importance. Followed by an analysis of the lead up in verses 1-2, then examine Jesus first declaration to Nicodemus in verse 3, including a proposed alternative translation. Followed by Nicodemus response in verse 4, then a deep analysis of Jesus re-declaration and addition of the word water in verse 5. Concluding with supporting information from verses 6-8. All these

---

<sup>1</sup> Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1 - 11. The New American Commentary* (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman, 1996.), 169.

sections will include important points from the text as well as an explanation of why that information is important to prove that Jesus is teaching of the necessity of the new spiritual birth.

### **General Context**

To properly exegete any passage of scripture understanding its context is of critical importance. John's gospel opens in Chapter 1 with the famous prologue, followed by Jesus's interactions with John the Baptist, ending with the calling of the disciples. Then Chapter 2 contains the opening of Jesus's public ministry which starts with the miracle of turning of the water into wine and the cleansing of temple in righteous anger.

Chapter 2 ends with the following verses:

“Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.”<sup>2</sup>

There are 2 points in these that are vitally important for properly understanding what comes in chapter 3. First, these verses summarize what had been going on as Jesus public ministry had begun, which is that many were “believing” in him, an account of the signs he was performing.

Herman Ridderbos provides insights on this passage,

“The evangelist does not say that they pretended to be believers or anything like that; he does not deny that they believe. They believed in Jesus as a man sent from God, as, expressing the conviction of many, Nicodemus put it (‘we know’ 3:2)...At the same time, it is clear that not all ‘believing’ or ‘believing in his name’ could be equated with the faith mentioned in 1:12, where the link is made - as it will be in the conversation with Nicodemus - with ‘being born of God.’ The evangelist himself does not pronounce this judgment but refers in verse 24 to the posture

---

<sup>2</sup> The Holy Bible: *English Standard Version (ESV)* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), John 2:23–25.

Jesus adopted toward the many who believed in him because of his miracles. ‘Jesus did not trust himself to them,’ did not count on them as followers of whom he could be sure.”<sup>3</sup>

These comments help to explain that though many seemed to believe, they were not converted, and Jesus knew that they were unconverted, in fact later in the gospel many would depart from Jesus when he pointed out their dependance on his signs.<sup>4</sup>

The second key point to pull from these 2 verses is that Jesus knows what is “in man”. As far as the overall structure is concerned these verses are a segway from the beginning of Jesus ministry into the following portion of the book. Following his encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus then meets the woman at the well where he very clearly reveals that he knows what is in her heart. He is exposing her inmost thoughts and offers her the thing she longs for most, in her case eternal water. In chapter 3 he also examines the soul of Nicodemus, opting rather to confront his fatal flaw.

The original texts of the God-inspired scriptures did not contain chapter and verse divisions, therefore when interpreting sections of text information from surrounding passages must be kept in mind. From these verses the context is established, primarily that people are flocking to Jesus on account of the signs that he was doing, and second that Jesus “knows all men” which means that he knows the hearts of all men. These points provide the purpose for the narrative that follows.

### **Lead Up**

---

<sup>3</sup> Ridderbos, Herman N. *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 122.

<sup>4</sup> John 6:66

## The Man (Verse 1)

To further show the connection between chapter 2 and 3 the original language is profitable. Borchert says, “The pericope begins with what seems to be a clear connection to the linking section of 2:23-25 by the use of Greek δὲ (best rendered here as ‘now’) and the vague expression ‘there was a man.’ Nicodemus, however, was an important man, a Pharisee, and a ruler (ἄρχων) of the Jews. Johns’ description of him marks him not merely as a community leader but as one of the revered seventy, who along with the high priest composed the Sanhedrin.<sup>5</sup>” This information is sufficient to show the information gained in verses 23-25 provide a tool to interpret what follows, this is a great example of a poorly placed chapter division.

Borchert also introduces the first actor in this drama, Nicodemus, a character who provokes 2 major questions. First, Who was Nicodemus and what did he believe? Jesus is going to use him to prove his supernatural knowledge of the hearts of men, but what can be known externally. To begin Borchert already noted that he is a member of the Sanhedrin, William Hendriksen expands noting, “also that he was a scribe: i.e. a professional student, interpreter and teacher of the law.<sup>6</sup>” This shows that he was a man whose job it was to study and teach the words of God, that they should be engrained into the very fiber of his being. Further due to his exclusive religious affiliations, his theological understanding can be assumed. Commenting on this point Hendriksen adds,

---

<sup>5</sup> Borchert, *John 1 – 11*, 169.

<sup>6</sup> William Hendriksen. *Exposition of the Gospel According to John. New Testament Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1983) 131

“Although the Pharisees were right in many points of doctrine – the divine decree, man’s moral accountability and immortality, the resurrection of the body, the existence of spirits, rewards, and punishments in the future life... they made one basic and tragic error: *They externalized religion*. Outward conformity to the law was far too often considered by them to be the goal of one’s existence.”<sup>7</sup> [emphasis added]

Hendriksen shows that even though the Pharisees were steeped in the Scripture, they failed to understand the true point of religion. Externalization left the Pharisees with the belief that they could make themselves righteous by their actions. Ernest Hengstenberg references Josephus understanding of the party saying that “according to the doctrine of the Pharisees, it is for the most part in the power of man to do right or wrong and they taught further, that it depends on man's will, to act virtuously or criminally. They enveloped themselves entirely in a self-made holiness<sup>8</sup>.” This self-made holiness is the fatal flaw of the pharisees, ‘whitewashed tombs<sup>9</sup>’, This is an accurate description of Nicodemus, clean on the outside but stained inside, the very thing Jesus will shortly expose. Jesus is going to show that sin is a matter of the heart, that humans are sinful to their core and require a new spiritual birth to come into relationship with God.

Many people have asked why Nicodemus came to Jesus at all? Some say that his career is as a ruler of the religious life of the people, so he had a responsibility to investigate the commotion for the sake of protecting the people from a false teacher. However, most assuredly God from all eternity had ordained that he would have a meeting with the Christ. Nicodemus believed himself to be righteous, but he was not. Horatius Bonar comments on this saying,

“Unconsciousness of his own need; insensibility to his own sin; palsy of the conscience - this is man's great evil. To remove the unconsciousness, and to impart true consciences in

---

<sup>7</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 131.

<sup>8</sup> Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg. *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*. (Minneapolis, Minn: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, 1980) 156.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 23:27

regard to these things, is so now the first great work of the Holy Spirit in the soul. That this unconsciousness is voluntary and deliberate we cannot doubt...Man shrinks from knowing the worst of himself; nay, he refuses to know it. He willfully shuts his eyes to the nature and to the extent of his spiritual evil.<sup>10</sup>”

God is using this meeting to show that true religion is not a matter of externals, but of the heart.

### By Night (Verse 2)

Much discussion surrounds the time setting of this meeting, with a variety of possible answers as to what his motivations were, Hendriksen offers three possibilities.<sup>11</sup> The first and most common is that Nicodemus was interested in Jesus but was afraid of the reaction from the other leaders of the Jews. However, Hendriksen mentions that it is likely too early on in Jesus' life for there to be intense opposition. The two remaining options he offers are that either Nicodemus or Jesus were too busy to meet during the day. Hendriksen makes no final decision on the matter and is difficult to be dogmatic but, Borchert points to another possibility,

“Although seasonal and day/night designations can be properly understood as time notations in this Gospel, they usually are more importantly also symbolic representations of the spiritual nature of the story (e.g., 10:22-23; 11:9-10; 13:20). As indicated in the prologue (1:4-5) light and darkness are conceived as opposing principles with darkness in John illustrating the negative aspects such as the realm of Satan, error, evil, doubt, and unbelief... most commentators are agreed that the reference to night is a picture of a man who was in an uneasy state of unbelief or doubt.<sup>12</sup>”

Nicodemus' reasoning is unknowable, but God is pointing to the darkness in Nicodemus.

The second point of interest in this verse is why Nicodemus addressed Jesus as Rabbi? The Greek word Nicodemus uses here is first used by John in 1:38 which Hendriksen explains,

---

<sup>10</sup> Horatius Bonar. *Studies in the Gospel of John*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1972) 17.

<sup>11</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 132.

<sup>12</sup> Borchert, *Studies in the Gospel of John*, 170.

“In answering the two disciples of the Baptist use the term of polite address, “Rabbi.” This word is derived from an adjective meaning great; hence, Master or teacher. Because John is writing to Christians drawn (mainly) from the Gentile world, he interprets Aramaic terms. Hence, we read, and they said, Rabbi, which, translated, means Teacher.<sup>13</sup>”

This address, when used by the disciples, is one of respect. Which they use only during Jesus earthly ministry while they were engaged in the disciple-teacher relationship, never after the resurrection. But why did Nicodemus use the term? Borchert argues that,

“The statement proves to be a perfect example of Nicodemus ironical misunderstanding of Jesus... Nicodemus, representing his learned group, began by addressing Jesus with the polite title ‘Rabbi.’ In doing so he ‘graciously’ acknowledged Jesus as his equal, even though Jesus would be popularly recognized by council members as one of the ‘ignorant,’ people of the land. Since Jesus had to work with his hands (a carpenter), he was expected to be unable to spend his time in the minute study of the law and in the traditions of the elders.<sup>14</sup>”

Nicodemus sees himself as the image of perfection in his religion, and Jesus as less righteous than himself. What a setting for Jesus to reveal the inward need, imparted perfection from the one standing before him, the only one truly holy. This air of disrespect will lead to an even stronger impact in Jesus’s words.

Finally, the last question to be addressed is who Nicodemus thinks Jesus is. He is not seen as the Messiah surely, but he states that he thinks he is from God. Hendriksen comments, “Nicodemus is convinced that Jesus must stand in very close relation to God to be able to do these signs.”<sup>15</sup> Borchert comments on these signs,

“To be fair to Nicodemus, we should note that he was in some ways quite accurate because, as he said, no one would be able (δύναται) to do the signs (σημεῖα - plural) Jesus was doing ‘if God were not with him.’ Signs were pointers to reality, and one of the important themes of this gospel is the recurring call of Jesus for people to recognize the

---

<sup>13</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 103.

<sup>14</sup> Borchert, *Studies in the Gospel of John*, 170-171.

<sup>15</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 132.

witness being given in the signs. (5:36, 6:26-32;9:39-41, 14:8-11) *But signs were not ends in themselves.*<sup>16</sup> [emphasis added]

These verses are clearly connected to the previous chapter by this idea of “signs”, the men following Jesus were intrigued by what they could see, as Nicodemus was. Hendriksen explains the true purpose of the signs saying “The signs (τὰ σημεῖα) he was doing. Signs are done in order to strengthen true, saving faith (20:30,31). Of themselves they do not create faith. *The Holy Spirit must do this.* Moreover, once saving faith is present, one will believe the word of Jesus even when there is no sign.<sup>17</sup> [emphasis added] Nicodemus is completely and entirely wrapped up in externals.

From this lead up section, it has been established that verses are connected to the preceding section showing the need to see them as one whole. Following that many concerns were addressed which will aid in interpreting the rest of the passage. However, the key remains that Jesus is using this encounter to fulfill John 2:25 by revealing the fatal flaw in Nicodemus understanding of salvation.

### **Jesus First Declaration to Nicodemus (Verse 3)**

“Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’”<sup>18</sup>

“ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῇ ἄνωθεν, οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ.”<sup>19</sup>

#### **Introduction**

---

<sup>16</sup> Borchert, *Studies in the Gospel of John*, 171.

<sup>17</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 127-128.

<sup>18</sup> The Holy Bible, *ESV*. John 3:3

<sup>19</sup> Michael W. Holmes. *The Greek New Testament: SBL Edition* (Lexham Press; Society of Biblical Literature, 2011–2013), John 3:3.

This verse introduces the first of the two “problems” in this passage, as well as the first of the two primary pieces of evidence that affirm that Jesus is indeed teaching Nicodemus his absolute need for spiritual rebirth that can come by a work of God. This will be done by showing that ‘γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν’ is better translated as ‘Born from above/From God’.

Before diving into the discussion on this verse there is an incredibly small textual variant to address. The variant is so minimal that it is not even mentioned by the UBS committee in the current edition.<sup>20</sup> However the World Bible commentary notes that in some of the church fathers’ writings, “For τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ, some cursives and numerous Fathers read τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν. This may be due to the known frequency of the expression in Matt, ‘to enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Matt 5:20;7:21;18:3;19:23).”<sup>21</sup> This is to note that the Greek text which is provided in the SBL and UBS editions appear to have no textual variation worthy of noting in their present form, as best noted by all modern scholars in the pericope of study.

He begins with a statement normally translated into English as the phrase “truly truly” Henriksen discusses the phrase saying, “The Aramaic double Amen (occurring 25 times in the Fourth Gospel). It may be freely rendered, most solemnly.”<sup>22</sup> Further Borchert provides an explanation of the meaning noting, “Jesus’ response begins with that familiar Johannine double

---

<sup>20</sup> Aland, Kurt, Strutwolf, and Newman. *The Greek New Testament: The standard edition for translators and Students, with Dictionary*, 5<sup>th</sup> revised ed. (Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014) 313.

<sup>21</sup> Beasley-Murray, George Raymond. *World Biblical Commentary: John* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1987.) 45.

<sup>22</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 111.

Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν' (lit 'truly truly') first introduced in 1:51. It is a clear signal of an important affirmation by Jesus.<sup>23</sup>

### The Problem

The words that Jesus uses are intentionally vague, using a rhetorical device that he uses many times in the Gospel of John. It is a “paradoxical saying, a veiled and pointed remark, often in the form of a riddle. The first one was uttered by John the Baptist.”<sup>24</sup> This introduces the problem.

“It must have sounded like a riddle to the ears of Nicodemus. This remains true whether the conversation was conducted in Greek or in Aramaic. The Greek text as it lies before us immediately raises a problem. *When Jesus said, 'unless one is born ἄνωθεν, 'what is the meaning of the last word? It can mean 'from above' (from the top) .... However, the word can also have a different connotation; namely, 'anew' or 'again' (Gal 4:9). And, in the third place it may mean 'from the first,' 'from the beginning (Luke 1:3, Acts 26:5).'*”<sup>25</sup> [emphasis added]

The problem is how should these Greek words be translated, specifically ἄνωθεν. Γεννη on the other hand is universally accepted to mean born. On the subject Borchert points out that the KJV, RSV and NIV all prefer the translation as “born again”, however he points out that,

“The meaning of ἄνωθεν, frequently rendered ‘again,’ is an intriguing matter. The Greek word ἄνωθεν here is *multidimensional* and *can* mean ‘again’ or ‘from above’ as well as the less likely ‘from the beginning.’ There does not seem to be an Aramaic/Hebrew term that would allow such a variety of meanings. Accordingly, there probably would be no play on the meanings of ‘again’ and ‘from above’ in Aramaic as it is here with the Greek ἄνωθεν the story, however, is intriguing because it suggests a misunderstanding on the part of Nicodemus. The Johannine writer obviously found the Greek word ἄνωθεν to

---

<sup>23</sup> Borchert, *Studies in the Gospel of John*, 173.

<sup>24</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 124.

<sup>25</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 133.

encapsulate this misunderstanding. When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, he meant that this pharisee should experience birth from God or birth ‘from above’ (ἄνωθεν).”<sup>26</sup>

Both authors mention the issue of whether or not the conversation took place in Greek or Aramaic, both pointing to the strangeness of the word choice. Ridderbos agrees with this saying, “Sometimes scholars speak of a play on words possible only in the Greek: Jesus had in mind ‘from above’ but Nicodemus understood ‘anew.’ If, however one goes back to the unquestionably Semitic origin of this pronouncement, then such a play on words is hard to construe and one encounters an Aramaic word that can only mean ‘from above.’”<sup>27</sup> Both Ridderbos and Borchert rely on the language of discussion as the key factor for their translations in spite of the nuance. These comments are interesting; however, we are not told which language the conversation was in, only which it was recorded in. Therefore, to engage in speculation is not profitable.

Scholars discard the translation of “from the beginning” due to it not fitting the context.

Beasley explains the final two options,

“ἄνωθεν can mean ‘from above’ and ‘again, anew.’ Westcott and Bultmann insisted on the latter meaning here, Bernard and Schnackenburg affirmed that it must mean the former; others consider that both meanings are intended.”<sup>28</sup> [emphasis added]

Further John McHugh adds,

“Older English versions favor ‘born again’ (3), but there has recently been a shift towards ‘from above’ (1). ἄνωθεν could of course carry a double meaning, encompassing both (1) and (3), the interpretation preferred by Loisy, 1st ed., 307, Lagrange (Cautiously), Barrett, Brown, and many others, and possibly intended by those who translate anew. On this interpretation ἄνωθεν here means, on the lips of Jesus, from above (1), but it is misunderstood by Nicodemus as meaning mere again (3). Bosmard’s view is very similar; ἄνωθεν means again, a second time (3), but this is taken by Nicodemus to mean a second physical birth, whereas Jesus’s intention was to point to the need for a second, but

---

<sup>26</sup> Borchert, *Studies in the Gospel of John*, 172-173.

<sup>27</sup> Ridderbos and Vriend, *The Gospel according to John*, 125.

<sup>28</sup> Murray and Raymond, *World Bible Commentary*, 45.

this time spiritual birth. The double meaning can be expressed in English by reborn from above, but only by sacrificing the ambiguity.”<sup>29</sup>

His comments further explain the ambiguity of the language and difficulty of translation.

Language scholars are truly divided on how best to translate these verses. This is a situation where the Greek cannot be directly translated into English without an interpretive decision being made.

### Closer to a Solution

Frédéric Godet is a proponent of ‘from the beginning,’ when refuting against ‘from above’ he said,

“He would rather have employed the expression ἐκ θεοῦ, of God? The misunderstanding of Nicodemus (ver. 4) is more easily explained, if Jesus said in Aramaic: anew, rather than from above, since even in this latter case, also, Nicodemus might have spoken of a second birth. At all events, it follows from the expressions: a second time (δεύτερον) in his mother’s womb, that, if he thought of a birth coming from above, he understood this term in the sense in which it can be applied even to the natural birth,—that is to say, that every child who is born comes from God, descends from heaven. However, if the word ἄνωθεν expressed here such a striking idea, the emphasis would be laid upon this word, and, in that case, it ought to be placed before the verb. Placed after the verb, ἄνωθεν only strengthens the idea of beginning connected with that of being born, which leads us to give to this adverb the temporal, *rather than the local sense*: from the beginning.”<sup>30</sup> [emphasis added]

Godet argues from the other options that Jesus could have used to argue what he thinks Jesus said. This is possible but it does not allow the words of the text to interpret themselves in a simple way, this gymnastic approach is unnecessary. In fact part of his argument is based on Nicodemus misunderstanding. However with the context of 23-25, his inability to understand

---

<sup>29</sup> John F. McHugh, *John 1 - 4: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary. The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament*. (London: T & T Clark, 2009.) 225-226

<sup>30</sup> Frédéric Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of John with an Historical and Critical introduction*. (New York, New York: Funk and Wagnalls Publishers, 1886) NA.

should be expected. To reinforce that claim, “Jesus’s reply is a play on ‘ability(δύναται)’; namely, unless one is born from above, such a person is not able (οὐ δύναται) to ‘see the Kingdom of God.’ This contrast sets up a further series of statements about what is possible according to Nicodemus’s finite minds and what is actually possible according to Jesus (cf. also 3:4-5,10).”<sup>31</sup> Nicodemus’s finite minded misunderstanding of faith is the reason for why this conversation is being had, not a reason to mistranslate his teaching.

However, Godet did provide an alternative which though he rejected brings the reader closer to a proper understanding. He said,

“The word ἄνωθεν has, in the three other passages where John uses it (ver. 31; 19:11, 23) the local meaning: from above, that is to say, from heaven. The passages, also, may be compared in which he makes use of the expression: to be born of God; for example, 1:13, and in the 1st Epistle 2:29, 3:9, etc.; nine times in all. These parallel passages seem decisive and have determined a large number of interpreters (Origen, Erasmus, Lücke, de Wette, Meyer, Baumlein, Reuss, etc.) to adopt this meaning here.”<sup>32</sup>

The idea of “local meaning” is pivotal to understanding the text.

### The Solution

Those who are committed to the grammatical-historical method of understanding scripture recognize that the two keys to proper translation are a proper grammatical understanding of the text and a grasp of the contextual situation with a goal of communicating the authors intention. Hendriksen points out that,

“It can mean ‘from above’ (from the top). *In fact, everywhere else in John's gospel it has that meaning (3:31,19:11,19:23).* It seems probable, therefore, that also here (in 3:3,7) it has that significance. Moreover, also in matt 27:51, Mark 15:38 and James 1:17, 3:15, 17

---

<sup>31</sup> Borchert, *Studies in the Gospel of John*, 171.

<sup>32</sup> Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of John with an Historical and Critical introduction*, NA.

it has that sense. Jesus, then, we may believe, was referring to the birth 'from above,' i.e., from heaven."<sup>33</sup> [emphasis added]

Hendriksen points to the very thing that Godet wrongfully rejected it. When John uses this phrase in his writing in every other place it means "from above/from God", this is what John intends to mean here. In addition, with the context provided from the previous chapter there is more than enough evidence to confidently assert that he assumed that his readers would understand him to mean, "from above." The proper translation of this text is "from above," meaning "from heaven," meaning "From God." The force of these words is meant to convey that Nicodemus cannot save himself, though he thinks he can by keeping an external religion. Simply translating the verse as "born again" allows for the possibility that one could cause a new birth to take place, while Jesus is intending to show the very opposite. This paper asserts that some of the ambiguity should be sacrificed for the sake of more clear communication of Jesus words by translating the verse "you must be born from above" meaning "from heaven" or "from God."

### The Kingdom

The idea of the kingdom introduces some further controversy, on what is meant by "entering the Kingdom of God." On this Larry Jones writes "No difference exists between seeing and entering the realm of God and these two verbal images will function synonymously throughout the 4th gospel (3:36, 6:40, and 14:7)."<sup>34</sup> Whether seeing or entering the idea remains the same that Jesus is referring to gaining access into the kingdom of the Father.

There is however more discussion on "the kingdom." Arno Gaebelein believes that,

---

<sup>33</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 133.

<sup>34</sup> Larry Paul Jones, *The Symbol of Water in the Gospel of John. Journal for the Study of the New Testament Sheffield* (England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997.) 70.

“The gospel preacher generally identifies the Kingdom of God with salvation and speaks of it in the sense of being right with God, getting saved and receiving eternal life, which is all very true. But the original meaning in connection with Nicodemus is quite overlooked. Nicodemus certainly did not understand by the kingdom anything different from that kingdom which the prophets of his people had predicted. It is the Kingdom promised to Israel, the Kingdom, which is not now, which will come someday and into which Israel will enter.”<sup>35</sup>

Once again arguments based on Nicodemus understanding are contextually foolish. Here this dispensational writer rejects the traditional understanding of the phrase, wrongfully. Borchert on the other hand points out that,

“The phrase ‘Kingdom of God’ (which is so familiar in the Synoptics) is used only here and at v. 5 in the entire Johannine Gospel. Normally John did not use Kingdom terminology because he seems to have preferred eternal life terminology. The use of the Kingdom at this point reminds the reader that John was not unfamiliar with the fact that Jesus employed such vocabulary in trying to explain the dynamic relationships humans can have with God.”<sup>36</sup>

Andreas Köstenberger adds,

“In this sole cluster of references to the ‘Kingdom of God’ in the entire gospel, *entrance into God's Kingdom is predicated upon spiritual regeneration, a regeneration that is ultimately not merely corporate in the sense of national renewal* (the Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 38; see the allusion to Ezekiel and John 3:5) but *personal and individual* in nature. This confirms that old style Judaism is in desperate need of spiritual, personal renewal; nothing less than a new spiritual birth will suffice.”<sup>37</sup> [emphasis added]

Though Gaebelein rejects it he states the proper interpretation, “When Jesus speaks about entering the kingdom of God, it is clear that the expression is equivalent to having everlasting life or being saved (3:17,17). The kingdom of God is a realm in which his rule is recognized and

---

<sup>35</sup> Arno Gaebelein, *The Gospel of John: a Complete Analytical Exposition*. (Neptune, New Jersey: Lozeaux Brothers, 1965) 57.

<sup>36</sup> Borchert, *Studies in the Gospel of John*, 173.

<sup>37</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters. Biblical Theology of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2009.) 198.

obeyed and in which his grace prevails.”<sup>38</sup> The significance of this section is that the pharisees have entirely lost a need for personal salvation, their externalization of the law had lost the purpose of the law. Pink adds to this point using context from the rest of the gospel saying, “What light does this cast upon Judaism now! So far, we have seen a blinded priesthood (1:21,26); second, a joyless nation (2:3); third, a desecrated temple (2:16); and now we have a spiritually dead Sanhedrin.”<sup>39</sup> What a shameful state for the Jews, what a perfect time for a confrontation. To have eternal life, to enter the kingdom all mean to be in an upright relationship with God for all eternity. Jesus is using Nicodemus as an example of the dead Judaism which prevailed at the time by exposing his heart.

### Jumped the Gun

Finally, why did Jesus speak without allowing Nicodemus to ask a question. Simply, Jesus knows all men and though, “Nicodemus has not asked any question. Nevertheless, Jesus answers him, for he reads the question buried deeply in the heart of this pharisee.”<sup>40</sup> On top of this “Because the doctrine of human depravity, and the consequent necessity of regeneration, forms the basis of all their doctrines, which Christ, as the teacher come from God, had to communicate.”<sup>41</sup> Faith begins at the heart and regeneration is the heart of faith.

When preaching in this passage Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones used Nicodemus as the prime example of a religious person who thought themselves saved but was lost. He said,

---

<sup>38</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 133.

<sup>39</sup> Arthur Pink. *Exposition of the Gospel of John*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1956.) 103-104.

<sup>40</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 132.

<sup>41</sup> Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 160.

“There are large numbers of such people and very often they can spend a whole lifetime in seeking and inquiring and following various leads, taking up certain interests, reading in a certain direction or attending certain types of meetings. Their motive is exactly the same as that of Nicodemus, and it is an excellent motive. They recognize something different, something higher, something better, and they are very anxious to attain this, but they never seem to obtain it. They say you can spend a lifetime in that condition, always seeking, never finding.”<sup>42</sup>

Contrary to Jesus normal method of interaction with the pharisees, Jesus seems almost patient with Nicodemus. Exell points out, “Christ’s treatment of this distinguished visitor. He met him with calmness and civility. He came to save the great men as well as small.”<sup>43</sup> Jesus here is ministering to a sinner who needs to be reborn if he hopes to escape destruction and Jesus knows he has yet to be reborn.

#### **Nicodemus’s Response (Verse 4)**

This paper has shown that Nicodemus needed to be “born from above,” to which he expressed his utter confusion. Many modern scholars are equally as confused such as one who said,

“To assume that a man as astute as Nicodemus should have thought that the new birth to be literally physical is absurd. The question rather meant: ‘I acknowledge that a new birth is necessary, but I am too old to change the period my pattern of life is set. Physical birth is out of the question and psychological rebirth seems even less probable. Granting the truth of what you say, is not my case hopeless?’”<sup>44</sup>

Once again, the context of Jesus teaching from the previous section reminds the reader to expect Nicodemus to not understand spiritual things. Because he is spiritually dead.

---

<sup>42</sup>Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Experiencing the New Birth: Studies in John 3*. (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2015.) 27.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph S. Exell. *The Biblical Illustrator*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1880.) 191.

<sup>44</sup> Merrill Tenney. *John: The Gospel of Belief, An Analytic Study of the text*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948.) 86.

On this deadness, Henriksen notes, “Nicodemus reveals that he failed completely to grasp the deep meaning of the divine mashal. For other instances of crassly literal interpretation see on 2:19.”<sup>45</sup> The text referenced is a perfect example of the spiritually dead pharisees reacting with ridiculous incredulity to Jesus statements. Likewise, in this verse, Nicodemus proves by his crassly literal interpretation that he too, is indeed blind since he has not yet been born from above. Ridderbos argues likewise saying,

“This sort of reaction also shows how great the distance is between Jesus’s mode of thought and theirs and how time and again his words thus sound strange or even absurd to them in effect that Jesus undoubtedly intended to stimulate them to reflection but whose background and actual cause lay in the fact that Jesus spoke and acted from another reality that his partners in dialogue.”<sup>46</sup>

The spiritual chasm between these two men is infinitely wide. So wide that it could only be bridged by a supernatural work of grace by God the Father on high, in which a sinner is reborn and given new spiritual eyes. Jesus words may be hard to understand, but to Nicodemus they were more than hard John Bernard pointed out,

“He was probably familiar with the Jewish description of a proselyte as ‘one newly born’ but for Jews a gentile was an alien, outside the sheltering Providence of Yahweh. Certainly, he must begin his spiritual life anew, if he would be one of the chosen people. But it was incredible that any such spiritual revolution should be demanded of an orthodox Jew.”<sup>47</sup>

Jesus’ teaching is offensive to all the sinful world even to these that look clean. The Lord requires that those who know him be cleansed to the core, which can only come by his supernatural birth by faith. Nicodemus did not know his need, but Jesus did.

---

<sup>45</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 133.

<sup>46</sup> Ridderbos and Vriend, *The Gospel according to John*, 127.

<sup>47</sup> John Bernard. *A Critical and exegetical commentary on the Gospel according to Saint John*. (Edinburgh: Morrison and Gibb Limited, 1928.) 103.

## Jesus Redeclaration (Verse 5)

“Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.’”<sup>48</sup>

“ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς· Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μή τις γεννηθῇ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, οὐ δύναται εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ”<sup>49</sup>

## Introduction

Many controversial topics have already been addressed but nothing touches the debate over how best to understand verse 5. This paper will present an argument that Jesus is not teaching anything different than he did in verse 3. The ultimate question is, what did Jesus mean when he said, “born of water and of the Spirit?” Almost all commentators agree that the meaning of “Spirit” is obvious, but what about “water?”

Why did Jesus bother to repeat himself and continue on in the conversation in the first place? Undoubtedly the layout of these verses show that Jesus is elaborating on his previous point. “In his speeches Jesus stresses the necessity of this new birth. When Nicodemus could not understand what Jesus meant by birth anew (3.4), Jesus expanded his answer and attempted to clarify the concept (3.5-8).”<sup>50</sup> It is humorous that Jesus’s clarification has become a point of controversy.

## Improbable Interpretations

---

<sup>48</sup> The Holy Bible, *ESV*. John 3:5

<sup>49</sup> Holmes. *The Greek New Testament: SBL Edition*, John 3:5

<sup>50</sup> Jones, *The Symbol of Water in the Gospel of John*, 75.

The possible interpretations will be discussed in ascending order from least probable to most probable. The First three possible interpretations can be discarded without much discussion as shallow. The first of which is that by “water,” Jesus meant a vague cleansing power.

According to William Barclay Jesus meant,

“Water is the symbol of cleansing. When Jesus takes possession of our lives, we love him with all our heart, the sins of the past are forgiven and forgotten. The Spirit is the symbol of power. When Jesus takes possession of our lives it is not only that the past is forgotten and forgiven; if that were all, we might well proceed to make the same mess of our life all over again... *Water and Spirit stands for the cleansing and the strengthening power of Christ which wipes out the past and gives victory in the future.*”<sup>51</sup>[emphasis added]

The vague nature of this interpretation does not lead towards respect.

The second option is that “water” means “the word of God”. According to Pink, “This is ever the instrument used by God in regeneration. In every other passage where the instrument of the new birth is described, it is always the word of God that is mentioned.”<sup>52</sup> Others also stand in agreement saying, “Water here is figurative of the word of God as it also is in the 13th chapter in connection with the feet washing of his disciples and in Ephesians 5:26.”<sup>53</sup> However, there is no connection to the immediate context.

The third option is that Jesus by “water” meant putting off the old man. “Some have taught that two parts of regeneration are distinctly pointed out, and that by the word water is denoting the renunciation of the old man, while by the spirit they have understood the new life.”<sup>54</sup> Seeing these two words as antithetical to each other is a common mistake.

---

<sup>51</sup> William Barclay. *The Gospel of John*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975.) 129.

<sup>52</sup> Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 110.

<sup>53</sup> Gaebelein, *The Gospel of John*, 62.

<sup>54</sup> Calvin, John. *Commentaries: John*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1981.) 110.

All three of these options are not necessarily wrong. However, none of them stand with much textual evidence behind them and deal with Jesus words in a trite and shallow way. There are however three further options which are more consistent with Jesus meaningful speech patterns and with the overall context of the passage as it stands.

### Physical Birth

The first more probable understanding of the text is that Jesus is using “water and Spirit” to mean “natural birth and spiritual birth.” Craig Koester explains, “The sudden reference to water is peculiar, and some have suggested it refers to natural conception through seminal fluid or to physical birth out of the water in the womb.”<sup>55</sup> If this interpretation is true then it would be as if Christ was pitting the two ideas against each other. John Calvin explains that,

“Others think that there is an implied antithesis, as if Christ contrasted ‘water’ and ‘Spirit’ – i.e., pure and liquid elements - with man's earthly and gross nature. Thus, they take this saying as allegorical, that Christ was commanding us to put off our heavy and burdensome mass of flesh and become like water and air so as to move upwards or at least not be so much weighed down to earth. But both options seem to be at variance with Christ's meaning.”<sup>56</sup>

Students of Church history can see this interpretation as allegorical and the influence of Agnostic philosophy.

Don Carson sees this interpretation as, “*It is unbearably trite*. The first part is saying not much more than that to get into the kingdom, *you must exist*: you must be born, you must be here. That means all the weight of Jesus's answer is carried in the second part, “born of . . . the

---

<sup>55</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.) 183.

<sup>56</sup> John Calvin. *The Crossway Classic Commentaries: John*. (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1994.) 67.

Spirit,” making us wonder what the first part, “born of water,” is contributing to Jesus’s explanation.”<sup>57</sup>[emphasis added] Every word by Jesus in this Gospel is jam packed with deep meaning, why then would Jesus bother wasting his breath to state something as simple as, you must be born. Surely, he was not meaning to exclude those who die in the womb? This is a surprisingly common and traditional interpretation of the text but is certainly not the most faithful understanding of Jesus’s words, two further options remain.

### Baptism

By far the most common interpretation of this verse is that by saying “water” Jesus was referring to water baptism. A Catholic theologian said on this text, “The simple Catholic response is: ‘Yes, I have been born again—when I was baptized.’ In fact, Jesus’ famous ‘born again’ discourse of John 3:3-5, which is where we find the words ‘born again’ in Scripture, teaches us about the essential nature of baptism.”<sup>58</sup> This interpretation is not surprising coming from a Catholic theologian, since they hold to an understanding of baptismal regeneration.

What is surprising is that many protestant theologians take this view as well. The Lutheran theologian Hengstenberg says, “There are decisive reasons for this supposition, that by the water...is to be understood *the water of baptism*... The water is the seal of access to the Spirit.”<sup>59</sup> Though the theological system of Lutheranism is certainly not the reformed faith, this

---

<sup>57</sup> Don Carson, “What does ‘Born of Water and the Spirit’ Mean in John 3:5?”, The Gospel Coalition (July 29, 2019): <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/born-water-spirit-mean/>

<sup>58</sup> Timothy Staples. “Born Again: The Bible Way”, Catholic Answers Magazine (10/5/2013): <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/born-again-the-bible-way>

<sup>59</sup> Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 163-166

author shows that this interpretation spreads past the catholic church, though he believes likewise with the catholic that Jesus meant baptism directly and nothing more.

Furthermore, even some reformed commentators assume this reading. Though Henriksen has been immensely helpful here his contribution here adds difficulty. He says, “The key to the interpretation of these words is found in 1:22. (see also 1:26,31; cf. matt.3:11, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16) where water and spirit are also found side by side, in connection with baptism.”<sup>60</sup> He goes on to explain however that his argument is not that for baptismal regeneration but is rather that by “water” Jesus is referencing the work of the Spirit through pointing baptism.

“The evident meaning, therefore, is this: being baptized with water is not sufficient. The sign is valuable, indeed. It is of great importance both as a pictorial representation and as a seal. But the sign should be accompanied by the thing signified: the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit. It is the latter that is absolutely necessary if one is to be saved.”<sup>61</sup>

This idea can be summarized as if Jesus said, “the sacrament and the thing pointed to by the sacrament.” Koester agrees with Hendriksen saying “In this initial counter, Jesus gave washing with water a place in the process of new birth by connecting it to the work of the spirit, although the emphasis falls in the spirit rather than water.”<sup>62</sup> Finally, the Evangelical Press agrees too saying,

“Nicodemus Knew that there was a symbolic connection between water and purification in the teaching of scripture. He was bound to be aware that the baptism of John and would have known that this had been rejected by the Pharisees (Luke 7:30). He would

---

<sup>60</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 134.

<sup>61</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 134.

<sup>62</sup> Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, 183

also have known that John testified that his baptizing with water - the sign -so it was in preparation for Jesus' baptizing with the Holy Spirit - the substance-(1:33)."<sup>63</sup>

They rightfully note that the emphasis is on the work of the Spirit, However, they say that Jesus is pointing to "water baptism, and spiritual rebirth." They believe that Jesus is essentially pointing to water baptism and to the work of the Spirit through that sign. It must be admitted that it is indeed a possible interpretation. On the other hand "Nothing in the text itself, however, makes such an understanding compulsory."<sup>64</sup> In addition there appears to be one further interpretation that better fits the context.

If there is a better interpretation, why is this one so common? Well, "One can readily understand how a reader familiar with Christian tradition would conclude that birth 'of water and spirit' refers to the practice of baptism."<sup>65</sup> Baptism is pivotal in the Christian life however it may not be necessarily in this text at all, in fact,

"Nothing makes it imperative to consider the words of Jesus a call to baptism or an explanation of the effect of baptism. Although the practice of baptism may stand somewhere behind the text, *nothing stated by the narrator or by Jesus makes an association with baptism concrete*. Rather, *the flow of the narrative moves away from anything a person has the ability to do*, to what a person must accept to gain entrance into the realm of God. As readers can acknowledge the presence of the wind without knowing whence it comes or where to it goes, so also the sense of mystery surrounds birth of water (3.8). To limit the reality identified and made available by birth anew/of water and spirit to baptism alone *would restrict it unnecessarily and reduce the imperative of believing*."<sup>66</sup> [emphasis added]

---

<sup>63</sup> Gordan Keddie. *EP Study Commentary: John*. (Webster, N.Y.: Evangelical Press; Evangelical Press USA, 2000.)

<sup>64</sup> Jones, *The Symbol of Water in John*, 71.

<sup>65</sup> Keddie, *EP Study Commentary: John*, NA

<sup>66</sup> Jones, *The Symbol of Water in John*, 75-76.

The context of the Gospel of John refuses to allow Jesus words to be a call for Nicodemus to perform another external religious act.

In addition, if baptism is the required by an exegete, they are open to another issue.

“Some writers (Wellhausen, Merx, Bultmann) have judged the words *ὕδατος καὶ* to be an interpolation, during the redaction of the Gospel, in order to ensure a reference, church-inspired, to baptism. Others (Wedndt, Bernard, and many since agree, but consider them an entirely justified gloss, added to bring the saying of Jesus into harmony with the belief and practice of a later generation (Bernard). Their reasons are that ἐξ πνεύματος on its own without ὕδατος καὶ, accords better with ἄνωθεν understood as from above; that there is no mention of water in the explanatory verses which follow, 6-8; and that since the need for Christian baptism was never preached before the death of Jesus, it is incongruous even to hint at the idea in discussion with Nicodemus.”<sup>67</sup> [emphasis added]

This liberal redaction theory is flawed for a variety of reasons that will not be discussed here. If the church were to maintain that this text directly refers to baptism it would have to refute this claim directly. However, there is nothing in the text that requires “water” to mean baptism, and there is another option more consistent with interpretation and avoids the claims of Bultmann.

John Calvin got it right. He says “Accordingly, he employed the words spirit and water to mean the same thing, and this ought not to be regarded as a harsh or forced interpretation; for it is a frequent and common way of speaking in scripture, when the spirit is mentioned, to add the word water or fire, expressing his power.”<sup>68</sup> [emphasis added] In agreement is Origen who, “suggested that here ‘water’ differs from ‘Spirit’ only in notion, not in substance.”<sup>69</sup>[emphasis added] Calvin comments further grammatically saying, “By ‘water,’ therefore, is meant simply the inner purification and quickening of the Holy Spirit. Nor is it unusual to employ the word

---

<sup>67</sup> John F McHugh. *John 1 - 4: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary. The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament.* (London: T & T Clark, 2009.)

<sup>68</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries: John*, 111.

<sup>69</sup> Murray and Raymond, *World Bible Commentary*, 48.

‘and’ instead of ‘that is’ when the latter clause is intended to explain the former.”<sup>70</sup> [emphasis added] John Macarthur likewise makes a helpful connection saying, “Since Jesus expected Nicodemus to understand this truth (v. 10), it must have been something with which he was familiar. *Water and Spirit often refer symbolically in the Old Testament to spiritual renewal and cleansing* (cf. Num. 19:17–19; Isa. 4:4; 32:15; 44:3; 55:1; Joel 2:28–29; Zech. 13:1). In one of the most glorious passages in all of Scripture describing Israel’s restoration to the Lord by the new covenant, God said through Ezekiel 36.”<sup>71</sup> [emphasis added] Further,

“The *parallel structures* of Jesus words in 3.3 and 3.5 imply that we may consider the water and spirit *indefinable but not inseparable components of the same experience, namely, birth ἄνωθεν*. Support for this conclusion appears in the work of those who have argued that *the conjunction καὶ in the phrase ‘of water and spirit’ functions expegetically*; that is, in phrases like this one *the noun which follows καὶ clarifies and expands the meaning of the noun which precedes it*... The narrator places emphasis on the spirit, which Jesus will mention frequently in the remarks that follow, while water will disappear altogether from altogether.”<sup>72</sup> [emphasis added]

Don Carson likewise points to the parallel structure.

“John 3:3	John 3:5
Very truly I tell you	Very truly I tell you
no one can see the kingdom of God	no one can enter the kingdom of God
unless they are born again	unless they are born of water and the Spirit” <sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> John Calvin, *Crossway Classic Commentaries*, 68.

<sup>71</sup> John Macarthur, “What does it mean to be Born of Water and Spirit?”, Grace to You Ministries (May 17, 2023): <https://www.gty.org/library/bibleqnas-library/QA0302/what-does-it-mean-to-be-born-of-water-and-spirit>

<sup>72</sup> Jones, *The Symbol of Water in John*, 71.

<sup>73</sup> Don Carson, “What does ‘Born of Water and the Spirit’ Mean in John 3:5?”

In addition, it is important to recognize that Jesus was intentionally calling Nicodemus to think on the scripture of which he was a scholar. McHugh points out that, “Ezekiel 36:1-7, 24-28... These texts, along with Ezekiel 11:16-20 and Jeremiah 31:31-34, are fully adequate to account for the phrase reborn of water and Spirit, especially since Ezekiel’s influence will be seen again in John 4 (compare to Ezekiel 16:44-45).”<sup>74</sup>

There has been presented an extensive amount and a depth of evidence, that shows that based on the words of the text itself, combined with the context of the Gospel of John provided at the beginning of this paper, and larger Biblical context the proper understanding of these words is: and that in verse 5 when Jesus says, “born of water and of the Spirit” he is simply repeating what he said in verse 3 then elaborating on the same truth. Baptism is not directly in mind at all, Nicodemus is unable to save himself and must be “born from above.” Jesus is explaining his cutting statement to Nicodemus by expanding on it and elaboration to increase understanding.

### **Elaboration (Verse 6-8)**

Briefly the following verses affirm this interpretation, Hendriksen comments, “Great stress, accordingly, is placed on the fact that physical birth does not give one any priority in the sphere of salvation.... One could paraphrase it as follows: sinful human nature produces sinful human nature (cf Job 14:4, Ps 51:5).”<sup>75</sup> This entire conversation is centered around Nicodemus inability to save himself. Left without the power of the spirit, “The flesh of itself is unable,

---

<sup>74</sup> McHugh, *John 1 – 4*, 228.

<sup>75</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 134.

because of its frailty, to attain the destiny of eternal life, but the Spirit is the empowering means of life (John 6:63).”<sup>76</sup>

There is an intentional play on words here John Gill comments,

“The beauty and propriety of this simile will more appear by observing, that the same Hebrew word, רוח, is used both for the wind, and for the Holy Spirit of God; it is used for the wind, in Gen. 3:8 and 8:1; 1 Kings 19:11; Eccl. 1:6 and in other places, and for the spirit of God, in Gen. 1:2 and 6:3; Job 33:4 and elsewhere: and so likewise the Greek word πνευμα, is used for them both, for the wind in this place, and often for the Holy Ghost: and it may be observed, that the Holy Spirit, because of his powerful, comfortable, and quickening influences, is compared to the wind, especially to the south wind, in some passages of the Old Testament, which Christ might have in view, Cant 4:16; Zech. 9:14.”<sup>77</sup>

To Nicodemus this must have been altogether confusing.

“To Nicodemus everything seemed so very, very strange. He was used to the idea of salvation by law-works; by an act of man. Now he is taught that salvation is a gift of God, and that, in its initial stage, it is brought about by an event in which man is necessarily passive. *A person can do nothing about his own birth.*”<sup>78</sup> [emphasis added]

He was a man enslaved to a works-based righteousness, yet man can only be saved by something which he has no part in. The way the spirit works is invisible and incomprehensible “We only know that he whose workmanship it is bloweth where he listeth. Not in caprice, or by accident, but because he knows exactly of what material each of his creatures is made and apportions his distinctions and the unerring decision of perfect love and perfect justice.”<sup>79</sup> This is not an easy thing for man to comprehend. However, “If nature herself abounds an example as to

---

<sup>76</sup> Borchert, *John 1 – 11*, 176.

<sup>77</sup> John Gill. *An Exposition of the New Testament*. (Clowes, Northumberland-court: Mathews and Leigh, 1809.) NA.

<sup>78</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 134.

<sup>79</sup> Robertson W. Nicoll. *The Sermon Outline Bible*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988.) 401.

how the filthy can be made clean; how the impure can be made pure and how the ugly can be made beautiful, we must not, in our stupidity and blindness, reject the great truth of the new birth.”<sup>80</sup> Difficulty understanding is not a good reason to reject this truth.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has presented adequate evidence to assert that, in the first portion of John chapter 3 Jesus primary purpose is to confront the fatal flaw of Nicodemus understanding of salvation by teaching him the absolute necessity of the new spiritual birth, which only comes by faith in Jesus the Christ. This paper did so primarily by showing that verse 3 is best translated “born from above/from God” and that in verse 5 when Jesus says, “born of water and of the Spirit” he is simply repeating what he said in verse 3 then elaborating on the same truth.

The results of this paper show that familiar text hold great fruit in their intricacies. With an in-depth study and the proper understanding of these verses, how can a person not see the immense wisdom of God? He majestically and carefully, both presented the power of Christ to know man’s heart and graciously taught the necessity of God’s working in salvation. The God presented in this text is a great and powerful God who loves his children and saves them from wherever he finds them. Nicodemus was religious yet had a fatal flaw of externalization and legalism that would have kept him from the kingdom of heaven. Yet, Jesus certainly came to seek and save sinners, and this was one of his children who appears to be saved by the end of the Gospel. This text is a reminder to readers that even the passages of Scripture that are most familiar to us require us to read them in their full original context if we intend to properly

---

<sup>80</sup>Charles Chilton. *Satisfaction From the Scriptures*. (Boston, Massachusetts: W. A. Wilde Company, 1950.)

understand them. May all who read this paper be so encouraged by the graciousness of God that they avidly preach the Gospel of grace and the necessity of “birth from above” to anyone who will listen.

"I, Jacob Neiderhiser have written this paper exclusively for NT620. If this paper, in part or full, was submitted previously in another context, I have received permission from the course professor to use it for this assignment. While I may have received editing or proofreading advice, I made all corrections myself. I have properly cited each paraphrase, quotation, and borrowed idea in compliance with A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations (9th edition) and the RPTS Style Guide."

## Bibliography

Borchert, Gerald L. *John 1 - 11. The New American Commentary* / Gen. Ed. David S. Dockery 25A. Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman, 1996.

The Holy Bible: English Standard Version. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016.

Ridderbos, Herman N., John Vriend, and Herman N. Ridderbos. *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997.

Hendriksen, William. *Exposition of the Gospel According to John. New Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1983.

Hengstenberg, Ernst Wilhelm. *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, 1980.

Holmes Michael W. *The Greek New Testament: SBL Edition*. Lexham Press; Society of Biblical Literature, 2011–2013.

Aland, Kurt, Barbara Aland, Holger Strutwolf, and Barclay M. Newman, eds. *The Greek New Testament: The standard edition for translators and Students, with Dictionary, 5<sup>th</sup> Revised Edition*. Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014.

Beasley-Murray, George Raymond. *World Biblical Commentary: John*. Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1987.

Exell, Joseph S. *The Biblical Illustrator*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1880.

Godet, Frédéric, *Commentary on the Gospel of John with an Historical and Critical introduction*. New York, New York: Funk and Wagnalls Publishers, 1886

McHugh, John F. *John 1 - 4: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary. The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament*. London: T & T Clark, 2009.

Jones, Larry Paul. *The Symbol of Water in the Gospel of John. Journal for the Study of the New Testament* Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997.

Gaebelein, Arno. *The Gospel of John: a Complete Analytical Exposition*. Neptune, New Jersey: Lozeaux Brothers, 1965.

Pink, Arthur. *Exposition of the Gospel of John*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1956.

Köstenberger, Andreas J. *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters: Biblical Theology of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2009.

Lloyd-Jones, Dr. Martin. *Experiencing the New Birth: Studies in John 3*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2015.

Tenney, Merrill. *John: The Gospel of Belief, An Analytic Study of the text*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948.

Bernard, John. *A Critical and exegetical commentary on the Gospel according to Saint John*. Edinburgh: Morrison and Gibb Limited, 1928.

Barclay, William. *The Gospel of John*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975.

Calvin, John. *Commentaries: John*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1981.

Koester, Craig R. *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

Calvin, John. *The Crossway Classic Commentaries: John*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1994.

Carson, Don. "What does 'Born of Water and the Spirit' Mean in John 3:5?", The Gospel Coalition (July 29, 2019): <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/born-water-spirit-mean/>.

Staples, Timothy. "Born Again: The Bible Way", Catholic Answers Magazine (10/5/2013): <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/born-again-the-bible-way>

Keddie, Gordan. *EP Study Commentary: John*. Webster, N.Y.: Evangelical Press ; Evangelical Press USA, 2000.

McHugh, John F. *John 1 - 4: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary. The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament*. London: T & T Clark, 2009.

John MacArthur, "What does it mean to be Born of Water and Spirit?", Grace to You Ministries (May 17,2023): <https://www.gty.org/library/bibleqnas-library/QA0302/what-does-it-mean-to-be-born-of-water-and-spirit>

Gill, John. *An Exposition of the New Testament; In which the Sense of the Sacred Text is given; Doctrinal and Practical Truths are Set in Plain and Easy Light; Difficult Passages Explained; Seeming Contradictions Reconciled; And Whatever Material in The Various Readings and Several Oriental Versions is Observed The Whole Illustrated With Notes, Taken From The Most Ancient Jewish Writings*. Clowes, Northumberland-court: Mathews and Leigh, 1809.

Nicoll, W. Robertson. *The Sermon Outline Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988.

Chilton, Charles. *Satisfaction From the Scriptures*. Boston, Massachusetts: W. A. Wilde Company, 1950.