THE MEANING OF *BORN OF WATER AND SPIRIT*

IN JOHN 3:5

----------

A Paper

Presented to

Dr. James Davis

----------

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Class

Methods of Biblical Research

----------

by

David Ermold

Box: W491

October 18, 2007
Introduction

During Jesus’ earthly ministry, He was seen as a great teacher and interpreter of both scriptural and theological matters. Although many times He would either clarify an OT teaching or articulate a new truth, which would astound His audience, He would also occasionally say a statement that simply baffled them. Some of these statements still confound readers of the NT today, which, in turn, lead to a variety of views. One such instance is found in the third chapter of John’s Gospel, as Jesus is having a conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus. As the two men discuss what it means to be γεννηθη ἄνωθεν, Jesus simply declares that “ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθη ἐξ ὑδατος καὶ πνεύματος, οὐ δύναται εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ.” When Jesus says that one must be γεννηθη ἐξ ὑδατος καὶ πνεύματος, He is primarily alluding to passages in the OT that equate water with the work of the Holy Spirit, and is demonstrating it as such by the language and grammar employed.

Not all would hold to this view. Indeed, there are four other views that are prominent, and these views take ὕδωρ to varying degrees of literalness. The most literal interpreters view ὕδωρ as water. Even within this view, there are distinctions. Some see it as the water baptism of John, and others the church ordinance of water baptism. Second, some scholars see Jesus metaphorically referring to biological fluid surrounding childbirth. A third group sees ὕδωρ and πνεῦμα as the life-giving work of God. However, given Jesus’ audience, as well as the grammatical construction, it would be best to see ὕδωρ and πνεῦμα as referring to the Holy Spirit and His work.
The first view sees Jesus as referring to literal water. Osburn believes that this is assumed as the “inseparability of baptism and spiritual rebirth in the early church is clear.” Even though it is admitted that the main focus of this passage is not baptism, it has been argued throughout church history that what Jesus meant by ὕδωρ was, indeed, baptism. The exact referent of this water, however, divides the scholars that see it as such.

*The baptism of John*

The first, and most probable, of the baptismal views is that Jesus was making reference to the water baptism of John. Westcott goes so far as to say that “it can scarcely be questioned that as Nicodemus heard the words, water carried with it a reference to John’s baptism, which was a divinely appointed rite.” He goes on to argue that this is the picture that Nicodemus would have received from Jesus’ words. Hendrikson adds that “the key to the interpretation of these words is found in 1:22,” and that, although the sign of baptism is valuable, “the sign should be accompanied by the thing signified: the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit.”

Beasley-Murray argues that “the conjunction of water and Spirit in eschatological hope is deeply rooted in the Jewish consciousness,” and is supported by OT passages, as well as the Essene’s attempt to “unite cleansing and the hope of the Spirit” through their ritual washings.

---


4 George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982) 49. Wai-Yee Ng comes to this same conclusion: “‘Water’ in 3:5 refers to the ritualistic cleansing with water, or water baptism, the symbolic expression of repentance, the anticipatory rite. The ‘spirit’ refers to the eschatological fulfillment, the coming of the Spirit, the new heart as an eschatological gift.” Wai-Yee Ng, *Water Symbolism in John: An Eschatological Interpretation* (Studies in Biblical Literature; New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001) 75.
This, however, would force βaptivzw back into the OT prophets, instead of allowing for a normal reading from their standpoint.

The church ordinance of baptism

A second baptismal view is that John’s mention of ὑδωρ is in reference to Christian baptism. Dodd writes that the “instructed Christian reader would immediately recognize a reference to baptism as the sacrament through which the Spirit is given to believers.”⁵ Luther adds, “Here Christ also speaks of the Holy Spirit and teaches us to regard Baptism as a spiritual, yes, Spirit-filled water, in which the Holy Spirit is present and active; in fact, the entire Holy Trinity is there. And thus the person who has been baptized is said to be born anew.”⁶

This view presupposes that Jesus would be referring to an ordinance that would be commanded for an institution that would not exist for three years. How would Nicodemus be aware, and deserving of the rebuke, should Jesus be referring to the church ordinance? Answering the question positively, F. F. Bruce concludes that “it echoes OT phraseology and might have been calculated to ring a bell in Nicodemus’s mind.”⁷ According to Bruce, Nicodemus should have connected these passages to John’s baptism, and through John’s foreshadowing of Christ, to Christ’s baptism as well.⁸

---


⁸ Ibid., 84.
What is important to mention is that some critical scholars will argue that ὕδωρ κατά is a “later addition,” if not “added by the evangelist” as he wrote.⁹ Brown writes: “For Bultmann, for instance, the phrase is the contribution of the Ecclesiastical Redactor who was attempting to introduce sacramentalism into the Gospel.”¹⁰ This, however, introduces denials of inspiration and inerrancy, which are refuted on their own levels.

Critique of the literal water views

These views, which see ὕδωρ as literal water, fail to accurately sense the context of the passage. It is important to note, as Erickson does, “that the emphasis throughout the passage is on the Spirit and that there is no further reference to water.”¹¹ Furthermore, even if baptisms were in view, it would go no further than John’s baptism, as the church ordinance was not yet established.¹²

In addition, the Bible does not teach baptismal regeneration. This is nowhere more prominent and stressed than in the Gospel of John itself. In John 20:31, John clearly states that his purpose for writing is ἵνα πιστεύητε ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστιν ὁ χριστός ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ ἵνα πιστεύοντες ζωὴν ἔχητε ἐν τῷ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ. John’s gospel only presents belief as the condition of eternal life. Anything that adds to that sole condition is then, logically, referring to something in addition to eternal life. Therefore, in John 3, Jesus can not be adding a second requirement, such as baptism, to eternal life. There must necessarily be something else in view.

---


What surely defeats this view is how the conversation unfolds. Nicodemus obviously is not thinking of John’s baptism when he responds to Jesus’ comments. On the other hand, he is caught up wondering how someone can reenter their mother’s womb. If it was obvious, as the proponents hold, Nicodemus would have pinpointed the concept right away. In addition, how would ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραήλ be expected to know any of these three concepts if they were either not commanded in the OT, in the case of John’s baptism, or not in place yet, in the case of Christian baptism.

Carson admonishes those that hold this view when he writes that

those who adopt this position, of course, are forced to admit that John’s words could have had no relevance to the historical Nicodemus. This part of the account, at least, becomes a narrative fiction designed to instruct the church on the importance of baptism. What is not always recognized is that this theory makes the Evangelist an extraordinarily incompetent story-teller, since in v. 10 he pictures Jesus berating Nicodemus for not understanding these things… The entire view seems to rest on an unarticulated prejudice that every mention of water evoked instant recognition, in the minds of first-century readers, that the real reference was to baptism, but it is very doubtful that this prejudice can be sustained by the sources.13

It is worth noting that Carson does not completely discount a “secondary allusion” to baptism.14 Regardless, it is not the primary meaning of the passage, and therefore can be dismissed.

**Ŷδορ as Biological Fluid**

The biological fluid view believes that when Jesus mentions Ŷδορ, He is metaphorically referring either to semen, or, more popularly, to the fluid that is released from the rupture of the amniotic sac just prior to childbirth.15 In other words, the only way someone can be γεννηθέν ἂνωθεν is to be physically born through ὅδορ, then spiritually born through πνεῦμα.

---

14 Ibid., 192.
15 Ibid., 191.
A proponent of this view is Tricia Gates Brown. She views ὑδωρ as referring to physical birth and its inherent inability to produce spiritual results, as being in contrast to the πνεῦμα birth that is ἀνωθεν.\(^{16}\) To Brown, “Jesus stresses that humans are unable to bring about spiritual birth.”\(^{17}\) In support of her view, Brown cites Song 4:13-15, and Prov 5:15-18, 9:13-17 as examples of how water is used to exemplify sexual relations.

Although it appears that Nicodemus had amniotic fluid in mind, this view is defeated with Jesus’ correction of his misunderstanding. In v. 3, Jesus says that one must be γεννηθῇ ἀνωθεν in order to see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus, in v. 4, takes ἀνωθεν to mean again, which harkens back to physical childbirth.\(^{18}\) However, Jesus corrects this, and specifically in v. 7, where He tells Nicodemus not to be amazed at this teaching. In reality, Jesus is amazed that Nicodemus, a Pharisee, does not understand this principle. This seems to imply that there is something intrinsic in this imagery that would steer someone towards the OT, which should have been familiar to someone of Nicodemus’ status.

Another argument against this view is the parallelism in vv. 3 and 5. In v. 3, Jesus says, “γεννηθῇ ἀνωθεν,” and in v. 5, “γεννηθῇ ἐξ ὑδάτως καὶ πνεῦματος.” It can then be concluded that ἀνωθεν and ἐξ ὑδάτως καὶ πνεῦματος are equal. To make ὑδωρ mean any biological fluid is to conclude that the ἀνωθεν birth is of the physical nature.\(^{19}\) Brown herself affirms this conclusion when she writes, “the replacement of ‘born ἀνωθεν with ‘born of water and spirit’


\(^{17}\) Ibid., 121.

\(^{18}\) Not including John 3:3, 7, there are eleven usages of ἀνωθεν in the NT. Ten of these (Matt 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 1:3; John 3:31, 19:11, 23; Acts 26:5; Jas 1:17, and 3:15, 17) are all directional in nature, and can be translated as above or beginning. Only one usage (Gal 4:9) is plainly again. While this allows for the latter usage in John 3, it is unlikely because (1) Nicodemus was thinking again, and Jesus corrects this, and (2) the usage in John 3:31, the most immediate context, is plainly from above.

qualifies the former, eliminating the possible meaning ‘born again,’ since ‘born of water and
spirit’ implies something more than a second physical birth, and makes clear that the type of birth
Jesus intends is not attainable by human means.\textsuperscript{20} To Brown, the \textit{καὶ} is conjunctive, noting that
the \textit{πνεῦμα} birth is necessary in addition to the \textit{ὑδωρ} birth.

Borchert aptly notes another logical fallacy with this view when the Greek is
considered.\textsuperscript{21} In v. 5, Jesus equates \textit{ὑδωρ} and \textit{πνεῦμα} as equals; in v. 6, He distinguishes between
\textit{σῶρξ} and \textit{πνεῦμα}. It would stand that \textit{ὑδωρ} and \textit{σῶρξ}, then, cannot be related for contextual
reasons.

\textbf{Ὑδωρ as Water, Πνεῦμα as Wind}

Zane Hodges argues that the traditional reading of \textit{πνεῦμα} as \textit{Spirit} misses the mark of
what Jesus meant. He argues that \textit{ἀνωθεν} should be translated, according to its context, namely,
\textit{from above}.\textsuperscript{22} This being the case, Jesus is alluding to several places in the OT where “natural
phenomena which originate \textit{in heaven}... have a vital and vivifying effect \textit{upon earth}.”\textsuperscript{23} For
support, Hodges mentions that in the desert area of Israel, the rain came from heaven and was
carried across the land by winds.

Nicodemus certainly, says Hodges, would have called to mind several passages, two
being Isa 44:3-5 and Ezek 37:9-10. These two highlight the refreshing qualities of water and
wind, respectively, yet also point to the Spirit of God as being the agent of their work. As Burge

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Brown, Spirit in the Writings of John}, 119.


\textsuperscript{22} Hodges, “John 3:5,” 216.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 216.
writes, “Jesus is here pointing to the dawning of a new eschatological era.” In other words, the prophecies concerning a new work of God’s Spirit are coming to pass. Throughout the OT, water is equated with the work of the Spirit, and Jesus is leading Nicodemus to this conclusion.

While this view does not differ much from the final view, it is distinct enough to keep separate, as Hodges sees πνεῦμα as referring simply to wind as opposed to the Holy Spirit. What is intriguing to note is that most translations employ My Spirit in Isa 44 instead of wind, as Hodges would suggest. In addition, Carson notes that “πνεῦμα almost always means ‘spirit’ in the New Testament.” Not only that, but John’s usage of πνεῦμα in v. 6 suggests that he is thinking of spirit throughout this entire passage. The exception would be in the first usage in v. 8, along with the accompanying verbal form, which seems to warrant wind and blows, respectively. However, John is using πνεῦμα-wind to explain something that the πνεῦμα-Spirit does, which is the referent of the second usage of the word in the verse. Keener agrees: “The nearer context of Spirit in 3:6 offers no allusion to wind, [so] we doubt that the allusion is clear in 3:5.” There seems to be more at stake in these OT passages than a simple wind. The prophets are communicating the yet future work of the Spirit of God.

ュー as the Work of the Holy Spirit

This final view sees Jesus as using ὁ υἱός and πνεῦμα to refer to the Holy Spirit and His work. Several lines of evidence support this conclusion. First, the grammar employed by John

---


25 The following are translations that employ My Spirit: NASB, KJV, NKJV, ESV, HCSB, NIV, ASV, NLT, Message, and Amplified Bible. Indeed, not one translation was found that uses a different wording.

26 Carson, John, 194.

27 Ibid., 194.

supports this view, although this argument is not conclusive in and of itself. The phrase ἐξ ὕδατός καὶ πνεύματος is governed by the preposition ἐκ, meaning that the two nouns are linked together by this usage. This is further supported if the reader takes the καὶ in its ascensive sense, so as to read, “of water, even the Spirit.” Admittedly, this is not the most common usage of the word; however, the argument does not hinge on this evidence alone. Köstenberger adds that “the fact that ‘born of water and spirit’ in 3:5 further develops ‘born again/from above’ in 3:3, by the use of one preposition (ἐξ, ex) to govern both phrases in 3:5, and by antecedent OT (prophetic) theology.”

Second, it is not unnatural for the biblical authors to ascribe additional words to the Holy Spirit which “express His power.” Calvin uses the examples of Matt 3:11 and Luke 3:16, where the Holy Spirit is said to baptize with fire. Fire does not mean that the Spirit engulfed the men in flames, but that it was with power. Likewise, water is meant to highlight the “inward purification and invigoration which is produced by the Holy Spirit.”

Third, in the same vein, Belleville claims that there are “two prominent themes associated with the concept of ὕδωρ in the OT: the theme of renewal and the theme of cleansing.” In John 3:10, Jesus rebukes Nicodemus for being a teacher of Israel and not knowing these things. Because of the OT concept of ὕδωρ, Belleville argues, Nicodemus should have been able to


30 Erickson, Christian Theology, 1107. This use of the conjunction is found in Daniel B. Wallace, Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996) 670.


33 Ibid., 65.

34 Belleville, “John 3:5,” 139.
clearly understand what Jesus was saying. In her conclusion, she cites Ezek 36:26-27 as the primary example. McCabe agrees with this conclusion when he writes: “By the nature of Jesus’ berating Nicodemus, this would clearly suggest that Jesus’ discourse on the new birth is rooted in the Old Testament.”

Even though that should be enough to establish a pattern that Nicodemus should have recognized, it may be helpful to look at John’s usage of ὕδωρ in his gospel. John uses ὕδωρ twenty-one times. Of these twenty-one usages, thirteen of them are indeed used for physical water, and seven are used as spiritual ὑδάτος ὁντος, which leaves the usage of John 3:5. McCabe summarizes the usage as such: “Consequently, if the metaphorical examples of ὕδωρ are consistently used in John for spiritual vivification, this would suggest that ὕδωρ is used in 3:5 in a similar matter.”

Fourth, the context contends that even though there is no article with πνεῦμα in v. 5, the presence of the article in vv. 6 and 8 make it seem as though the Holy Spirit, not just any spirit, or wind for that matter, is in view. What magnify this interpretation are the OT passages that exemplify an eschatological work of water and spirit. Belleville has already mentioned Ezek 36:26-27. McCabe adds Joel 2:28; Ezek 11:18-20, 29:29; and Isa 32:15-20, 44:3, to which he

35 Ibid., 140.
37 BDAG, 1025-6.
38 John records ὕδωρ to denote literal water in 1:26, 31, 33; 2:7, 9 (2x); 3:23; 4:7, 13, 46; 5:7; 13:5; and 19:34, where ὕδωρ is used in conjunction with such ideas as baptism, turning water into wine, drinking, pools, washing, and plural effusion. The seven metaphorical usages are 4:10, 11, 14 (3x), 15; and 7:38, where it is identified as ὑδάτος ὁντος. A key to the determination of the usage in John 3:5 is the identity of ὑδάτος ὁντος with the πνεῦματος in 7:38-39. It is then seen that there is always contextual evidence as to the identity of the water, whether literal or metaphorical. Given John’s usages, it would stand to reason that the ὕδωρ in John 3:5 is metaphorical of the work of the Spirit.
40 Newman, John, 80.
The use of πνεῦμα in John is consistent with the Old Testament predictions of the Spirit’s quickening work in salvation. John uses πνεῦμα 24 [sic] times, and he generally uses it as reference to the Holy Spirit producing spiritual life."\(^{41}\) One notable example is John 7:38-39, where he writes ποταμοὶ ἐκ τῆς κοιλίας αὐτοῦ ῥέουσιν ύδατος ζωντός. τούτο δὲ ἐίπεν περὶ τοῦ πνεύματος. In this similar passage, ύδωρ is a metaphor for the work of πνεῦμα.

Fifth, the context of John’s gospel supports this view. In the rebuttals of the aforementioned views, it has been shown that the manner in which the conversation unfolds supports the view that ύδωρ is a metaphor for the work of πνεῦμα.\(^{42}\) Positively, given John’s usages of the terms, as well as the conditions that he states for eternal life, that is, solely belief, the context demands that ύδωρ stands as a metaphor for the work of the πνεῦμα.

Lincoln aptly summarizes this view:

So, instead of spatial imagery – from above – being employed of the believer’s birth, this second saying has a reference to the Spirit, who is from above in the sense of being ‘of God’ and who was traditionally associated with the life of the future kingdom and of the age to come. It should not be surprising that entry into the kingdom requires an experience of the power that sustains its life.\(^{43}\)

Or, as Morris writes: “Jesus is referring to the miracle that takes place when the divine activity remakes anyone.”\(^{44}\)

\(^{41}\) McCabe, “John 3:5,” 90. In twenty-three of John’s usages of πνεῦμα (not including John 3:5), fourteen refer to the Holy Spirit: 1:32, 33 (2x); John 3:6 (1x), 8 (1x), 34; 6:63 (1x); 7:39 (2x); 14:17, 26; 15:26; 16:13; and 20:22. Of the remaining, eight refer to man’s spirit: 3:6 (1x); 4:23, 24 (2x); 6:63 (1x); 11:33; 13:21; and 19:30; and one refers to wind: 3:8 (1x). Given John’s usage of the word, as well as the context, it would stand to reason that the πνεῦμα in John 3:5 is referring to the Holy Spirit.

\(^{42}\) Jesus corrects Nicodemus’ initial understanding in v. 5, so it cannot be biological fluid; in v. 10, Jesus remarks that Nicodemus should know to what ύδωρ refers, as he is ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραήλ, which eliminates physical water; and the context does not allow for πνεῦμα to refer to wind.


Carson cites one objection to this view. Jesus makes clear in John 7:39 that the Holy Spirit would not be given until after He had been glorified. The problem that arises is thus: How can Jesus require a Spirit-regeneration of Nicodemus in John 3 when He says in John 7 that the Spirit’s ministry is not yet available? The charge is easily answered. In John 3, Jesus is merely stating the requirements εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ, and not necessarily that Nicodemus must avail himself of this ministry immediately.

**Conclusion**

This paper has reviewed all the primary arguments for five varying interpretations of γεννηθῇ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεῦματος in John 3:5. When Jesus tells Nicodemus that one must be γεννηθῇ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεῦματος, He is harkening back to OT prophecies, such as Isa 44 and Ezek 36, which predict the eschatological purifying work of the Spirit, and the grammar of John 3:5 confirms it to that end. The only view presented here that is acceptable given not only the context of John, but the manner in which the conversation unfolds, is that ὕδωρ and πνεῦμα refer to the Holy Spirit and His work. Grammatically, the syntactical structure (i.e., preposition-noun-conjunction-noun) suggests that the two are equal. Theologically, it is not unnatural for the Holy Spirit to be in close proximity to another agent, such as fire or water. When given the OT’s concept of the purifying capabilities of water, the imagery of a ὕδωρ-πνεῦμα birth is quite striking. Concerning ὕδωρ, and its OT usage in conjunction with πνεῦμα, such a combination is not odd. Finally, John’s usage of πνεῦμα in the immediate context points to the Holy Spirit. A supporting passage that can be used to solidify this thought is John 7:38-39, where John explicitly equates ὕδατος ζωντος with τοῦ πνεῦματος.

It was demonstrated that three of these do not withstand normal exegesis of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, even though one of them (i.e., ὕδωρ as literal water)

---

45 Carson, John, 195.
has been the prevalent, majority view throughout church history. The idea of baptism is not at all present in the conversation, nor would have Nicodemus have readily understood the church ordinance, as Jesus expected him to understand the topic. The metaphorical view of bodily fluid is dismissed, as that is what Nicodemus had in mind, which caused Jesus to correct him. Hodges’ view cannot compensate for the usage of πνεύμα in the context as referring to the Holy Spirit.

Admittedly, the importance of this passage is not immediately practical. If the ἀνωθεν birth is of God, there is nothing that a man can do to bring it about. It is not a didactic passage that can be applied. That being said, the implications of this passage attest to the faithfulness of God to fulfill His promises. This ἀνωθεν birth was predicted in the writings of the major prophets, so much so that Nicodemus should have been able to recognize the allusion. Regardless, the portions of the OT that have been fulfilled are a sign that the God who promises is faithful to bring all those prophecies to completion. Despite whatever trials may come, solace can be found in the power of God to bring about His purposes, even if men fail to understand.
Bibliography


