

The Spirit In the Text of John 3:3-6

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The most popular interpretation of John 3:3-6 is that Jesus informs Nicodemus that he must experience a new birth (or birth from above); a birth effected somehow by water and the Holy Spirit. Much controversy has developed concerning the meaning of "water" here; i.e., is it or is it not baptism?. The term 'spirit,' however, has given rise to little controversy, if any, being traditionally interpreted by Catholic and Protestant scholars alike as "the Holy Spirit of God." This interpretation is reflected in the major English translations. KJV, ASV, RSV, NASV, and NIV. In each of these translations this interpretation is reflected in the English text by the capitalization of "Spirit," in the translation of the Greek word *pneuma*.

For those who are not familiar with the Greek New Testament, and the science of textual criticism, it should be mentioned that the earliest Greek manuscripts lying behind our English translations are written in all capital letters. The upper case/lower case printing, and punctuation in our English translations are the result of the editorial work of the translators; i.e., judgments based on their interpretations of the text.

Now, the question I wish to raise here is this; is the capitalized 'Spirit' in our English versions legitimate; is the Holy Spirit under consideration here in these words of Jesus? Or have the English translators imposed upon these verses a concept that isn't there in the Greek text? We will attempt an answer by setting out an exegetical analysis of the verses here under consideration.

Except One Be Born Again

The Greek of John 3:3 translates literally: "Except a certain one should be born (*gennao*) again (*anochen*), he is not able to see the

reign (*basileia*) of God." *Gennao* (to be born) is from a Greek word family of over thirty-some Greek words stemming from the verb *ginomai* - "I become." *Gennao* simply means "I beget, bring forth, to conceive; give beginning to; passively, (when used of persons) to be begotten, to be born." (Cf. Arndt & Gingrich, *Lexicon*, p. 154; and Abbott-Smith, *Lexicon*, p. 90.) The Greek *anōthen* (anew or again) is an adverb varying in meaning according to context. It is defined lexically as: "(a) from above...Mt. 27:51; John 19:23; from heaven: John 3:21, 19:11; James 1:17; (b) from the first, from the beginning: Luke 1:3, Acts 26:5; whence (c) anew, again: John 3:3,7..." (Abbott-Smith, *Lexicon*, p.43).

The sense of this word in the context before us is, "anew/again." This is the meaning Nicodemus attached to the word, which is evident from his reaction, "a man is not able to enter into the womb of his mother a second time and be born?" Jesus words, in the context as a whole, lend completely to this idea, as will be evident in the following discussion. The translation, "from above," as insisted on by some scholars, only fits if one assumes the spirit phraseology of verses 5-6 to be a reference to the Holy Spirit and, consequently, Holy Spirit regeneration. This interpretation, in the opinion of this author, is erroneous, and is based on an eisegetical handling of the text rather than exegetical.

The "new birth." of which Jesus speaks, is a prerequisite to enabling one to see (*eidein* - "perception" is the sense here) the reign (or sovereign authority) of God. The Greek *basileia* is properly an abstract term conveying the idea of "sovereignty, royal power, dominion;" it is only used by metonymy for the concrete concept of a kingdom (i.e., a territory or people over whom a king reigns). The expression "*ten basilean tou theou*," as used here in John 3:3 and 5, connotes the 'reign of God,' (i.e., his sovereign authority). Before one in rebellion against God can (or will) see and enter into the reign of God (submit to his authority), he must undergo a radical change, here called a "new birth" - a renewal of his spirit (inner man). This the Apostle Paul calls a "renewing of the mind" (Rom. 12:2); a change in the way one sees things, understands things, and thinks; and consequently, a change in the way one lives. To experience this

renewal, Jesus states that one must be born out of water and spirit. Now, the question here is; what is meant by “out of water and spirit?”

Of Water and of Spirit

Is this a renewal by the Holy Spirit or a renewal of the human spirit? The English versions assume the Holy Spirit here by the capitalization of the term ‘spirit’ (*pneuma*); however, such is not necessarily indicated by the historical context, nor the Greek text.

The Historical Context of John 3:3-6

In an analysis of any text, one must consider such matters as who is speaking, to whom, when, to what intent, or in what sense, the purpose of the conversation, the ideas or themes developed, the unity of thought, the contrasts, etc. The matters of significance within and questions suggested by the context here (textual and historical) are as follows: (1) Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, a Jew living in the days of Jesus’ earthly sojourn (perhaps one to two years before his crucifixion). (2) What meaning would these words have for Nicodemus? (3) What was Jesus telling him to do, wait for Pentecost to be baptized and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit? (4) If Jesus is speaking of the Holy Spirit here, how was Nicodemus to know this? Especially in light of the fact that the Holy Spirit was not yet being given (cf. John 7:39).

Jesus was not expounding upon Holy Spirit regeneration here; rather, he was talking to Nicodemus about something Nicodemus must do in order to be able to see and enter into the reign of God. Now, historically, how would Nicodemus most naturally understand this teaching of Jesus? How could Nicodemus have understood Jesus’ reference to water in verse 5? Could the concept of baptism have occurred to him? Most assuredly, but whose baptism? What makes more sense, to conclude that Jesus was pointing Nicodemus to Pentecost (Acts 2:38), or to Mark 1:4; “the baptism of repentance unto the remission of sins,” first preached by John, then by Jesus and his disciples? Further, we should ask, “from what were

these sins to be removed?" The most obvious answer is "the spirit of man;" a concept in full harmony with that of Paul (Rom 6:1-4; 2 Cor 5:17) and of Peter (I Peter 1:3, 20-21). It was a spiritual renewal that was preached by John and effected by his baptism; and so also in the preaching and baptism of Jesus and his disciples.

The Greek Text of John 3:3-6

The Greek text translates literally:

. . .except a certain one should be begotten out of water and of spirit, he is not able to enter into the reign of God. The thing having been begotten out of the flesh, flesh it is, and the thing having been begotten out of the spirit, spirit it is (Jn. 3:5-6).

In verse 5, there is no definite article before *pneumatos* (spirit) in the Greek text; the preposition *ek* (out of), used with the genitive case here, governs both the terms water and spirit; the coordinating conjunction *kai* (and) does not separate water and spirit, rather, it joins them (i.e., a renewal of or pertaining to spirit that takes place of or pertaining to water).

Verse 6 continues in explanation of verse 3, in answer to the question of Nicodemus in verse 4. Jesus is here contrasting "that which is of flesh" with "that which is of spirit" - human flesh with the human spirit. The occurrence of *pneumatos* here in verse 6, used with the definite article, is contrasted with *sarx* (flesh), also used with the definite article. It is "the flesh" of man under consideration here, in contrast to "the spirit" of man. Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus of the latter (the spirit of man), not the former (the flesh of man) in answer to Nicodemus' question as to whether a man could experience a new physical birth. It is not a rebirth or a renewal of Nicodemus' flesh Jesus is talking about; rather, it is a rebirth or renewal of Nicodemus' spirit Jesus is talking about. The Holy Spirit is not under consideration here at all; it is the spirit of man, and specifically, in this case, the spirit of Nicodemus.

Conclusion

This exegetical analysis of John 3:3-6 is in complete harmony with the theme of spiritual renewal running throughout the New Testament; especially in the writings of Paul: Rom. 6:1-11; 7:6; 12:2; Eph. 4:23; Col. 3:10; 2 Cor. 5:17; see also: 1 Peter 1:21-22; 3:20-21; 4:6; Acts 2:38; 22:16; and John 6:63.

Reading Holy Spirit regeneration into the text of John 3:3-8 is inconsistent with the historical, contextual, lexical and syntactical exegesis of the passage. That the Holy Spirit is responsible for the revelation (the gospel) through which man is converted is not at issue here. The view that the Holy Spirit is under consideration here in the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus is inconsistent with the context in the thinking of this writer, on the basis that such an assumption is simply not supported by the evidence (exegetical data) within the text.

Perhaps it may be helpful to conclude with the comments of B.F. Westcott, whose understanding of the passage under consideration is in complete harmony with the foregoing analysis. Commenting on John 3:5, he writes:

Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit (or, and spirit). The preposition used (*ek*) recalls the phrase 'baptize - plunge - in water, in spirit' (Matt. iii, 11), so that the image suggested is that of rising, reborn, out of the water and out of that spiritual element, so to speak, to which the water outwardly corresponds.

If further we regard the specific Biblical ideas of water and spirit, when they are separated, it will be seen that water symbolizes purification . . . and spirit quickening; the one implies a definite external rite, the other indicates and energetic internal operation. (B.F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 49)

Marvel not, says Jesus that I said to you: You must be born again.

The wind blows where it wills, and the sound of it you hear, but you are not knowing from where it comes or where it is going. In this manner it is with everyone having been born of spirit. (John 3:7-8.)

Wind is invisible, it can't be seen, but one can see the phenomena it produces; likewise, you can't see a rebirth of one's spirit (his inner being), but one can see the phenomena it produces in his life when he enters the reign of God. Here is the message for Nicodemus of the first century, and for you and me of the twentieth century. Why try and make this text say something it doesn't say, when what it does say is so full of meaning?

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