

THE MEANING OF “BORN OF WATER AND THE SPIRIT” IN JOHN 3:5

by
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The Holy Spirit’s role in regeneration or the new birth has been the subject of many theological discussions. A text that has received considerable attention is John 3:5, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”¹ A major interpretative problem with this verse is the meaning of “born of water and the Spirit” (γεννηθῆ ἔξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος). Is “water” (ὕδατος) to be equated with baptism? Should water be correlated with procreation? Or, is water used as a symbol for the Word of God or cleansing? Furthermore, what is the relationship between “water” (ὕδατος), and “spirit” (πνεύματος)? Is water set in contrast to the spirit, or do water and spirit reflect a conceptual unity?

This article will attempt to determine the meaning of “born of water and the Spirit” by examining the immediate context of John 3 and other pertinent theological data. After this, we will survey some of the more dominant and popular interpretations of “water and the Spirit.”

AN EXAMINATION OF JOHN 3:5

In the history of Christian interpretation, John 3:5 has often been associated with Christian baptism.² Undoubtedly, the sacramentalism associated with a broad spectrum of Christianity has influenced some to interpret this verse in light of a sacramental grid. However, we must determine what this verse means in its immediate and overall canonical context. To determine the meaning of John 3:5, we will initially examine the key concepts within this text, followed by an examination of its literary features.

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¹All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the 1977 edition of NASB.

²Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 2 vols., AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966–70), 1:141.

An Examination of Key Concepts

Nicodemus is identified in 3:1 as a Pharisee, a “ruler of the Jews” (ἄρχων τῶν Ἰουδαίων). This identification would suggest that he was not simply a community leader, but a Jewish leader and perhaps a member of the Sanhedrin.³ After presenting his discussion of the supernatural origination of the new birth, Jesus chides Nicodemus in v. 10 for being “the teacher of Israel” (ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραήλ), yet unable to comprehend the subject of Jesus’ discourse, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things?” Two items are significant in v. 10. First, “the teacher of Israel” is a title reflecting that Nicodemus was a recognized teacher of Scripture. Second, as a well-known teacher, Nicodemus should have grasped the connection between Jesus’ doctrine of regeneration and its Old Testament foundation. By the nature of Jesus’ berating Nicodemus, this would clearly suggest that Jesus’ discourse on the new birth is rooted in the Old Testament. Carson has correctly observed that “nothing could make clearer the fact that Jesus’ teaching on the new birth was built on the teaching of the Old Testament.”⁴ We will survey four key concepts in 3:5, along with a correlation of each with their appropriate Old Testament background.

Born of

In a similar manner to the use of “Amen” in 3:3 and 1:51, Jesus stresses the importance of his teaching by introducing his remarks with a double “Amen.”⁵ He next sets forth a condition for entering the kingdom of God, viz., being “born of water and the Spirit.” The verbal phrase is comprised of an aorist subjunctive passive verb followed by a preposition, γεννηθῆ ἔξ, “is born of.” We should initially observe that Jesus’ use of the passive voice unequivocally stresses that the human participant in the new birth is completely passive.⁶ In addition, we should observe that this specific metaphor of God giving “birth” to an individual is not used in the Old Testament. It is possible that Jesus draws upon a common experience of childbearing to illustrate the new birth.⁷

³C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), p. 204.

⁴D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 198.

⁵F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 172, 173.

⁶Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 97.

⁷Linda L. Belleville, “‘Born of Water and Spirit’: John 3:5,” *Trinity Journal* 1 (Fall 1980): 137.

However, it is equally plausible that the seed form of this specific metaphor may be seen in those passages where God’s covenant relationship with Israel is portrayed in a familial relationship. Yahweh is presented as Israel’s “Father” (Deut 32:6), and the covenant nation as his “sons” (Deut 8:5; 14:1; Jer 3:19) or “first-born” (Exod 4:22; Jer 31:9; Hos 11:1).⁸ The relationship between Yahweh and the promised Davidic king is also portrayed in familial terms, “Father” and “son” (2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chr 17:13; 22:10; 28:6). David is specifically referred to as Yahweh’s “firstborn” (Ps 89:27).⁹ It is not until the postexilic period that we find pious individual Jews designated as “sons of God” (Jub 1:23–25; Sir 4:10; 23:1, 4; Wis 2:13, 16, 18).¹⁰ While familial terms are used of Israel and the Davidic ruler, the concept of God giving “birth” to individuals is not specifically used in Old Testament thought. However, the familial terms may provide a potential informing background for Jesus’ use of γεννάω. According to Brown, the familial terms should have provided an informative, though limited, background for Nicodemus.¹¹

Though the Old Testament context does not provide a complete picture about the new birth, John presents a more complete picture, for he uses γεννάω more often to refer to God’s sovereign role in regeneration¹² than any other writer in the New Testament.¹³ In Johannine literature, γεννάω is used 28 times;¹⁴ 16 of these refer to the new birth, with 6 in John’s gospel and 10 in 1 John.¹⁵ In John’s gospel, those who receive Christ in 1:12–13 are “born” (ἐγεννήθησαν), “from God” (ἐκ

⁸*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, s.v. “Adoption,” by Victor P. Hamilton, 4:363 (hereafter cited as *NIDOTTE*).

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Brown, *John*, 1:139.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop the theological ramifications of the doctrine of regeneration; for fuller treatments of this doctrine, see Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), pp. 718–21; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 699–707; and Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, pp. 93–112.

¹³Paul uses, in 1 Cor 4:15, the aorist active indicative, ἐγέννησα, to speak of his own role as a proclaimer of the gospel which resulted in the Corinthians experiencing the new birth. Outside of the Johannine material, other synonyms for γεννάω are used, such as ἀναγεννήσας in 1 Pet 1:3, 23, παλιγγενεσίας in Tit 3:5, and ἀπεκύησεν in Jas 1:18.

¹⁴*New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, s.v. “γεννάω,” by A. Ringwald, 1:178 (hereafter cited as *NIDNTT*).

¹⁵Excluding 2 uses in 3:6b, 8, the other 10 examples are used in a physical sense (3:6; 8:41; 9:2, 19, 20, 32, 34; 16:21 [twice], and 18:37).

θεοῦ). In 3:3–8, an aorist passive form of γεννάω, followed by ἐκ or an equivalent, is used 5 times (vv. 3, 4 [twice], 5, 7) to express the concept of a spiritual birth produced by God. In particular, Jesus says in v. 3 if one is to see the kingdom of God, he must “be born from above” (or “born again,” γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν). Verse 5 closely parallels v. 3. Jesus’ replacement of ἄνωθεν with ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος in v. 5 strongly suggests that he is describing the same type of birth in both verses. 1 John further supports the divine origination of the new birth. Excluding an aorist active participle in 5:1, γεννάω is used in a passive form 9 times in 1 John, all of which refer to a birth produced by God, γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ or an equivalent (2:29; 3:9 [twice]; 4:7; 5:1 [twice], 4, and 18 [twice]). This would suggest that “born of God” in 1 John expresses the same concept as “born of the Spirit” and its equivalent expressions in John 3. By his consistent use of γεννάω, as well as his use of this verb in the passive voice, John stresses that this spiritual birth, regeneration, is a sovereign work of God alone. Hoekema summarizes the significance of this use of γεννάω with the following:

The passive voice of the verb tells us that this is an occurrence in which human beings are wholly passive. In fact, the very verb used, even apart from the passive, tells us the same thing. We did not choose to be born; we had nothing to do with our being born. We were completely passive in our natural birth. So it is also with our spiritual birth.¹⁶

Although Hoekema may place too much emphasis on the passive voice alone, it is nevertheless true that to be “born of the Spirit,” in John 3, connotes the Spirit producing new spiritual life.

Water

The Old Testament presentation of water provides an informing background for Jesus’ reference to ὕδωρ. Water was used in the Old Testament to symbolize cleansing and renewal. Water was used in priestly ablutions to denote ceremonial cleansing. Before the Aaronic priests entered their vocation, they were consecrated by ablutions (Exod 29:4). Water was also used by priests for ritual cleansing of their hands and feet (Exod 30:17–21; 40:30–32). Cleansing with water was also required after birth (Lev 12:1) and sexual emissions (Lev 15).¹⁷ Not only may water be associated with cleansing, but it is also used figuratively for renewal. On the one hand, to forsake Yahweh is to forsake “the fountain

¹⁶Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, p. 97.

¹⁷*NIDNTT*, s.v. “ὕδωρ,” by O. Bocher, 3:989; and *NIDOTTE*, s.v. “מִיָּדָה,” by Michael A. Grisanti, 2:930.

of living water” (Jer 2:13; 17:13).¹⁸ On the other hand, to come to God for the satisfaction of one’s thirst is to experience life (Isa 55:1–3). Therefore, water may be used as a metaphor for spiritual life. Water as a symbol for renewal is also connected with God fulfilling his promises of a physical restoration (Ezek 47:9; Zech 14:8). In addition, when it is used as a metaphor for cleansing and renewal, God is the source of this cleansing water (Isa 4:4).

In John’s gospel, ὕδωρ is used 21 times. Excluding John 3:5, it is used of literal water 13 times,¹⁹ and is used as a metaphor 7 times.²⁰ As a metaphor, “living water” represents life that is produced by the Spirit.²¹ In 4:14, the water given by Jesus becomes “a well of water [ὕδατος] springing up to eternal life [εἰς ζῶν αἰώνιον].” In 6:63, “it is the Spirit [πνεῦμα] who gives life [ζωοποιεῖν].” In 7:38–39, “from his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water [ὕδατος ζῶντος]. But this He spoke of the Spirit [πνεύματος].”²² 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 manner.

Spirit

In John 3:3–12, πνεῦμα is used five times and reflects Jesus’ theological emphasis in this passage. In the Old Testament “spirit”²³ may denote God’s animating principle of life (Gen 2:7; 6:3). While “spirit” may be used in this sense on a general level to describe God’s animating

¹⁸See *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s.v. “רוּחַ,” by Walter C. Kaiser, 1:502–3.

¹⁹For example, water is used of John’s baptism (1:26, 31, 33; 3:23), for satisfying one’s thirst (4:7, 13), at the pool of Bethesda (5:7), for washing feet (13:5), being turned into wine (2:7, 9 [twice]; 4:46), and as flowing from Jesus’ side (19:34).

²⁰The metaphorical use of ὕδωρ is found in 4:10, 11, 14 (three times), 15; 7:38.

²¹Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 260.

²²Support for this position is more fully developed by James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1970), p. 187; see also Kylne R. Snodgrass, “That Which Is Born from *Pneuma* Is *Pneuma*: Rebirth and Spirit in John 3:5–6,” *Covenant Quarterly* 49 (February 1991): 19.

²³The Hebrew term רוּחַ, “spirit,” is found in the Masoretic Text 377 or 378 (the count of 377 uses is taken from *NIDNTT*, s.v. “Spirit, Holy Spirit,” by E. Kamlah, 3:690; the count in Even-Shoshan, based upon the edition of the Koren Publishers in Jerusalem, is 378 in Hebrew and 11 in Aramaic [*A New Concordance of the Bible* (Jerusalem: Kiryath Sepher, 1985), pp. 1063–66]). Of the 377 or 378 times the Hebrew term רוּחַ is found in the MT, 264 of these are translated in the LXX with πνεῦμα.

force in all living creatures, it is more specifically used to denote the Spirit who will quicken his people and produce God's eschatological blessings. The Old Testament predicts that a time will come when God pours out his Spirit on all mankind (Joel 2:28). This pouring out of his Spirit involves a transformation that includes a cleansing from sin and a spiritual renewal of God's covenant people (Ezek 11:18–20; 36:25–27). This time will also include a restoration of God's blessings and righteousness (Isa 32:15–20; 44:3; Ezek 29:29).²⁴ 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 times,²⁵ and he generally uses it as reference to the Holy Spirit producing spiritual life.²⁶

Water and the Spirit

There is a coordination of water and spirit in a few key Old Testament texts, literature from the intertestamental period, and John's gospel. Water and spirit are correlated in Isaiah 44:3–5 and Ezekiel 36:25–27. The setting of these two passages provides significant Old Testament material for our understanding of John 3:5. Both Old Testament books provide a number of references to the new covenant promises²⁷ and place an emphasis on Israel's eschatological future.²⁸ In keeping with this twofold theological emphasis, both Isaiah and Ezekiel use the Old Testament term רוּחַ (“breath, spirit, wind”) over 50 times. Of the 377 or 378²⁹ uses of רוּחַ in the Masoretic Text, רוּחַ is found in Isaiah 51 times and Ezekiel 52 times.³⁰ Because of the major emphases of Isaiah and Ezekiel, these are texts with which a Jewish teacher such as Nicodemus should have been acquainted.

²⁴NIDNTT, s.v. “Spirit, Holy Spirit,” 3:692.

²⁵The noun πνεῦμα is used in 1:32, 33 (twice); 3:5, 6 (twice), 8 (twice), 34; 4:23, 24 (twice); 6:63 (twice); 7:39 (twice); 11:33; 13:21; 14:17, 26; 15:26; 16:13; 19:30; 20:22.

²⁶Dunn, *Baptism*, p. 189.

²⁷See R. Bruce Compton, “An Examination of the New Covenant in the Old and New Testaments” (Th.D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1986), pp. 32–33, 66–129.

²⁸On Israel's eschatological future in Isaiah and Ezekiel, see Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “A Theology of Isaiah,” in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), pp. 325–26; 335–38; and in the same book, see Eugene H. Merrill, “A Theology of Ezekiel and Daniel,” pp. 376–83.

²⁹See supra, n. 23.

³⁰See chart in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, s.v. “רוּחַ,” by R. Albertz and C. Westermann, 3:1202–3.

In Isaiah 44:3–5 water is associated with restoration of the land and God’s Spirit with the transformation of his people.

- ³For I will pour water on the thirsty land
and streams on the dry ground;
I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring
and My blessing on your descendants.
⁴And they will spring up among the grass,
like poplars by streams of water.
⁵This one will say, “I am the LORD’s”;
and that one will call on the name of Jacob;
And another will write on his hand, “Belonging to the LORD,”
and will name Israel’s name with honor.

This passage reflects a close association of water and spirit. “I will pour water” (אֶצְקֶנּוּ מַיִם) is parallel with “I will pour out My Spirit” (אֶצְקֶנּוּ רוּחִי). The significance of the parallelism is that one could legitimately correlate being “born of water” with being “born from above,” as Hodges has clearly indicated:

Accordingly, the Holy Spirit’s activity is here presented as an effusion of water *from above*, the effect of which in those on whom it falls is that they spring up like freshly watered plants (v. 4). But this, in turn, is connected with the realization that the individuals thus blessed are now truly “the Lord’s” (v. 5). Hence it would be difficult to discover a passage more apposite to the experience of new birth than this, and one might reasonably describe the recipients of such an experience as “born of water” *and* “born from above.”³¹

The context of Ezekiel 36:1–37:28 focuses on Israel’s future restoration. To develop how this restoration will be accomplished, Ezekiel places an emphasis on the Spirit’s life-giving operation. Two facets of the Spirit’s quickening work are stressed in 36:25–27, cleansing and transformation. Ezekiel further develops the transforming work of the Spirit in 37:1–14. In this context, Ezekiel uses the Hebrew term רוּחַ to develop his message about the life-giving operation of the Spirit. In v. 1 the Spirit (רוּחַ) of Yahweh transports Ezekiel to the valley of dry bones. The key question for this chapter is found in v. 3, “Son of man, can these bones live?” After Ezekiel’s ambiguous response (“O Lord God, Thou knowest”), Yahweh answers His own question by affirming that He would make “breath” (רוּחַ) to enter the dry bones and bring them back to life (vv. 5–6). However, the issue in this context is not simply about bringing bones back to life, but about the Spirit’s life-giving operation,

³¹Zane C. Hodges, “Water and Spirit—John 3:5,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 (July–September 1978): 217.

as vv. 11–14 explain.

¹¹Then He said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off.’ ¹²Therefore prophesy, and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel. ¹³Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people. ¹⁴And I will put My Spirit [רוּחַ] within you, and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken and done it,” declares the LORD.”

According to these verses, not only does God’s future work involve Israel’s restoration to the land, but it also emphasizes a placing of God’s Spirit within his people to bring them to life. Thus a focus of Ezekiel 37:1–14 is on God’s future vivification of his people.³² As such, this assists in establishing the overall context for Ezekiel 36–37. However, a key informing text for John 3:5 is Ezekiel 36:25–27.

Ezekiel 36:25–27 is set in a new covenant context.³³ This eschatological setting conjoins water and spirit in the context of cleansing from sin and a spiritual transformation.

²⁵Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. ²⁶Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit [רוּחַ] within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷And I will put My Spirit [רוּחַ] within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

In v. 25 water cleanses from sin, and in vv. 26–27 God’s Spirit (רוּחַ) produces a new heart and new spirit (רוּחַ) that enable obedience to God’s law. Though this transformation of heart is for the corporate nation, this would suggest that individuals also undergo a spiritual transformation (cf. Jer 31:31–34).³⁴ Therefore, Ezekiel 36:25–27 provides a

³²For a development of the details of the connection between Ezekiel 36:26–27 and 37:1–14, see Daniel I. Block, “The Prophet of the Spirit: The use of *rwh* in the Book of Ezekiel,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32 (March 1989): 37–39.

³³Though בְּרִית (‘‘covenant’’) is not used in Ezekiel 36:25–27, the placement of God’s Spirit within man suggests that this is a new covenant context; see Compton, ‘‘An Examination of the New Covenant,’’ pp. 32–33.

³⁴Block develops the similarities between Jer 31:31 and Ezek 36:27–28 (‘‘The Prophet of the Spirit,’’ pp. 39–40).

significant informing text for our interpretation of John 3:5.³⁵

From the intertestamental period, Judaism reflects the concepts of divine sonship, cleansing and renewal. In the pseudepigraphical book of Jubilees 1:23–25, it is stated by God: “I shall create for them a holy spirit, and I shall purify them so that they will not turn away from following me from that day and forever.... And I shall be a father to them, and they will be sons to me. And they will all be called ‘sons of the living God.’”³⁶ The Qumran community also reflects the motifs of cleansing and renewal. According to the *Rule of the Community*,

God will refine, with his truth, all man’s deeds, and will purify for himself the configuration of man, ripping out all spirit of deceit from the innermost part of his flesh, and cleansing him with the spirit of holiness from every irreverent deed. He will sprinkle over him the spirit of truth like lustral water (in order to cleanse) from all the abhorrences of deceit and from the defilement of the unclean spirit (1QS 4:20–22).³⁷

Thus the connection of water and spirit denoting a spiritual transformation finds a parallel in the context of Palestinian Judaism.³⁸

In John’s gospel, the noun ὕδωρ is only found three times on the lips of Jesus (3:5; 4:7–15; and 7:38–39). In 4:10, 11, 14, Jesus correlates living water with eternal life, and in 7:38–39 he correlates water with the Spirit. This suggests that Jesus uses water as a metaphor for the Spirit in his function of imparting life. If we attribute any significance to the fact that Jesus only refers to water in three contexts and that in the other two he connects these to the Spirit or life, this would suggest that his use of water in “3:5 likewise symbolizes the life-giving operation of the Spirit.”³⁹

An Examination of the Literary Context

To determine the intended meaning of a given passage, we must discover that meaning which is consistent with the sense of its literary context. We will attempt to examine the literary context in two ways. First, we will consider the theological emphasis of John 3. The

³⁵For other connections between Ezekiel and John, see *NIDOTTE*, s.v. “Ezekiel, Theology of,” by J. B. Job, 4:633.

³⁶For additional texts, see Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to John*, 3 vols., trans. Kevin Smyth, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 1:370.

³⁷This translation is taken from Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 7.

³⁸Schnackenburg, *John*, 1:370.

³⁹Dunn, *Baptism*, p. 189.

theological emphasis in this passage is greatly assisted by a number of parallel expressions to γεννηθῆ ἔξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος. Second, we will examine those syntactical features in v. 5 that have an impact on our study of γεννηθῆ ἔξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος.

Parallel Expressions

When John repeats a statement, whether it be Jesus' words or someone else's, part of the Johannine style is to include minor variations in the repeated statements. For example in John 6:35 and 48 Jesus says, "I am the bread of life" (ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς); however, he varies this in v. 51, "I am the living bread" (ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζῶν).⁴⁰ In the immediate context of John 3, Jesus informs Nicodemus in v. 3 that unless one experiences the new birth, he cannot "see (ἰδεῖν) the kingdom of God." In v. 5 Jesus replaces ἰδεῖν with εἰσελθεῖν ("enter"). Though entering the kingdom of God may be a slightly stronger statement than seeing the kingdom, the meaning of both is essentially the same.⁴¹ Therefore, "variation of expression is not intended to convey different ideas, but is typical of the style of the Fourth Gospel."⁴² Jesus describes the new birth five different times in this passage, yet each statement has a variation as the following reflects:

γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν, "born from above" (v. 3)

γεννηθῆ ἔξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, "born of water and the Spirit" (v. 5)

τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος πνεῦμά ἐστιν, "that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (v. 6)

γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν, "be born from above" (v. 7)

ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος, "born of the Spirit" (v. 8)

We should initially note that τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος πνεῦμά ἐστιν ("that which is born of the Spirit is spirit," v. 6), and ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος ("born of the Spirit," 3:8), are restatements of v. 5, with the exception that ὕδατος καὶ has been eliminated. This suggests that Jesus is emphasizing a birth produced by the Spirit. Though ἄνωθεν in 3:3, 7 is generally translated as "again,"⁴³

⁴⁰For a full development of John's use of variation as a stylistic feature, see Leon Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), pp. 293–319; see also Wayne A. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (March 1972): 49–55.

⁴¹Carson, *John*, p. 191.

⁴²Snodgrass, "Rebirth and Spirit," pp. 16–17.

⁴³The adverb ἄνωθεν is translated as "again" in the KJV, NASB, NIV, and NKJV.

it may also be translated as “from above.” Either translation is lexically⁴⁴ possible, and there is also a possibility that ἄνωθεν is a double entendre.⁴⁵ As such, ἄνωθεν can be taken in three ways. First, some have taken ἄνωθεν as having a double meaning.⁴⁶ Support for this has been drawn from Johannine style.⁴⁷ Though this understanding is perhaps possible, it misses the force of Jesus’ argument in vv. 5–8. Second, others have taken ἄνωθεν in a temporal sense as “again.” If this is the case, we should understand that Jesus informs Nicodemus that he must reenter his mother’s womb and be born a second time.⁴⁸ A common support for this interpretation is drawn from Nicodemus’s interpretation of Jesus’ words in v. 4, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?” The problem with this understanding is that Nicodemus misconstrues Jesus’ statement in v. 3. The point of vv. 5–8 is that one needs an impartation of life by the Spirit. Third, other commentators have argued for taking ἄνωθεν in a spatial sense, “from above.”⁴⁹ With this understanding Jesus informs Nicodemus that he must have a heavenly birth.⁵⁰ This understanding is supported from the only three other uses of ἄνωθεν in John, 3:31; 19:11, 23. In each case, ἄνωθεν means “from above.”

If we take ἄνωθεν in the third sense, this is another way of clearly indicating that one must be born of God.⁵¹ As such, γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν is equivalent to John’s emphasis in 1 John of being born from God. In our immediate context of John 3, this forms a tight parallel with Jesus’ other uses of γεννάω, for in each case Jesus is saying that if one is to enter the

⁴⁴Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 77 (hereafter cited as BAGD).

⁴⁵Each translation has its list of supporters; see Morris, *Gospel*, p. 213, n. 13; and Belleville, “Born of Water and Spirit,” p. 138, n. 75.

⁴⁶This is the suggestion made by the editors of BAGD, p. 77.

⁴⁷So Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1991), pp. 88–89; and Barrett, *John*, pp. 205–6.

⁴⁸From either end of the theological spectrum, this is followed by Bultmann, *John*, pp. 135–38; and Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on John’s Gospel* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978), p. 376–77.

⁴⁹For support of this understanding of ἄνωθεν, see Matthew Vellanickal, *The Divine Sonship of Christians in the Johannine Writings* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1977), pp. 172–74.

⁵⁰Gary M. Burge, *Interpreting the Gospel of John*, Guides to New Testament Exegesis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), pp. 143–44.

⁵¹Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, p. 97.

kingdom of God, he must be born of the Spirit. Thus, it is this third use of ἄνωθεν that Nicodemus must grasp. Therefore, this tight parallel thought of Jesus provides assistance in understanding what it means to be born of “water and the Spirit.” In keeping with this, Hodges appropriately says: “The expression ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, therefore, which replaces ἄνωθεν in the statement of verse 5, will fit the narrative most naturally if it is seen as an effort to communicate what it really means to be born *from above*.”⁵²

Syntactical Features

Two pertinent syntactical items of John 3:5 need to be addressed. First, in v. 5 the preposition ἐκ governs two nouns, ὕδατος and πνεύματος, that are coordinated by καί. This indicates that Jesus regards ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος as a conceptual unity. If ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος is a conceptual unity, this phrase may be taken either as a “water-spirit” source⁵³ or a “water-and-Spirit” source of birth.⁵⁴ A good case can be presented for either view in the context of John 3:1–8. With either view, there is one birth that is characterized either as “water-spirit,” or “water-and-Spirit.” Neither of these understandings suggest that there are two births, physical and spiritual. Furthermore, there is no suggestion of a contrast “between an external element of ‘water’ and an inward renewal achieved by the Spirit.”⁵⁵ The origin of regeneration is a ὕδωρ and πνεῦμα source.⁵⁶

Second, the anarthrous use of πνεῦμα may suggest that this is not a reference to the Spirit per se, but to “the impartation of God’s nature as πνεῦμα.”⁵⁷ As such, πνεῦμα, like the anarthrous ὕδωρ, would emphasize the quality of the new birth. This is to say, the emphasis of πνεῦμα in v. 5 is on the nature and work of the Spirit, and not on the Spirit as a person.⁵⁸ In addition, this use of πνεῦμα could be suggested by the nature of the prepositional phrase in v. 5. The preposition ἐκ governing

⁵²Hodges, “Water and Spirit,” p. 213.

⁵³Belleville, “Born of Water and Spirit,” p. 135; so also Carson, *John*, p. 195.

⁵⁴Dunn, *Baptism*, p. 192.

⁵⁵*NIDNTT*, s.v. “Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament,” by Murray J. Harris, 3:1178.

⁵⁶Carson, *John*, p. 194. This is not the same position as Morris, who takes “water” and “spirit” as having the same referent and, consequently, meaning to be “born of ‘spiritual water’” (*Gospel*, p. 218). Instead, “water” and “spirit” have different referents, but they are a part of one birth (Carson, *John*, p. 194, n. 3).

⁵⁷Carson, *John*, p. 194.

⁵⁸Belleville, “Born of Water and Spirit,” p. 135, n. 66.

the two nouns, ὕδωρ and πνεῦμα, coordinated by καί naturally suggests that this phrase is a conceptual unity: a “water-spirit” birth.⁵⁹ Furthermore, this use of πνεῦμα as “spirit” is strengthened by a syntactical parallel in John 4:23, “the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth (ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ).” As in 3:5, a preposition (ἐν) governs two nouns, πνεῦμα and ἀληθεία, coordinated by καί. Thus, in John 4:23 a case can be made that πνεῦμα is not a reference to the person of πνεῦμα, but to the nature of πνεῦμα. As a result, this position argues that ὕδωρ is that which internally purifies and “πνεῦμα that which partakes of the essential nature of God himself.”⁶⁰

Though this understanding of πνεῦμα is exegetically compatible with John 3, a legitimate argument can be made for interpreting Jesus’ reference to πνεῦμα in 3:5 as a reference to the Holy Spirit. There are three reasons for this. First, an anarthrous noun may be definite;⁶¹ and, if this is so, then the anarthrous use of πνεῦμα in 3:5 may be treated as a definite noun referring to the Holy Spirit. In 7:39 πνεῦμα is used twice. The first use of πνεῦμα is with the article and the second is without it. Both are clearly references to the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, “when the noun is the object of a preposition, it does not *require* the article to be definite: if it has the article, it *must* be definite; if it *lacks* the article, it *may* be definite.”⁶² Thus, the anarthrous πνεῦμα may be a reference to the Holy Spirit.

Second, as we have argued, the prepositional phrase in John 3:5 (ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος) cogently argues for a conceptual unity. Does this conceptual unity suggest that both ὕδωρ and πνεῦμα focus strictly on a twofold source defining the nature of this spiritual birth, a “water-spirit” birth,⁶³ as opposed to a “water-and-Spirit” birth? While I recognize that John 4:23 provides support for a “water-spirit” birth, Matthew 3:11, in contrast, provides support for taking this as a “water-and-Spirit” birth. In this text John the Baptist proclaims that Jesus would “baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (βαπτίσει ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ καὶ πυρί).” As in John 3:5, we have a preposition ἐν governing two anarthrous nouns, πνεῦμα and πυρός. The baptism that would be performed by

⁵⁹Carson, *John*, p. 194.

⁶⁰Belleville, “Born of Water and Spirit,” p. 140.

⁶¹See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 247; Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek Illustrated by Examples* (Rome: Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963), pp. 58–59; and A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), p. 791.

⁶²Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 247.

⁶³Belleville, “Born of Water and Spirit,” p. 140.

Jesus is accomplished by two means: the Holy Spirit⁶⁴ and fire, with the preposition ἐν embracing both of these elements. Therefore, we have a “Spirit-and-fire” baptism.⁶⁵ Though πνεῦμα, in John 3:5, is not qualified by the adjective ἄγιος, we are suggesting that the prepositional phrase in this verse is analogous to the prepositional phrase in Matthew 3:11. Since “born of water and the Spirit” is parallel with “born from above” in vv. 3, 7 and “born of the Spirit” in vv. 6, 8, this would also provide some support for identifying Jesus’ use of πνεῦμα as a reference to the person of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁶ While recognizing that a “water-spirit” birth is certainly a conceptual unity, we conclude that a “water-and-Spirit” birth can also be regarded as a valid conceptual unity.⁶⁷

Third, Johannine literature uses a passive form of γεννάω with the preposition ἐκ (“born of”) to describe a believer’s spiritual birth as originating with God.⁶⁸ The construction “born of” is used 14 times in Johannine literature. Excluding John 3:5 for the moment, in every use the object of the preposition denotes the source from which the birth is produced. God is the object of the preposition 10 times,⁶⁹ the Spirit 2 times,⁷⁰ and the flesh once.⁷¹ In 12 of the 13 examples, God or the Holy Spirit produces spiritual birth. Since John 3:5 contains the same type of construction with πνεῦμα as the object of the preposition, this suggests that Jesus uses πνεῦμα to refer to the Holy Spirit.

Consequently, though it is possible that the anarthrous use of πνεῦμα in 3:5 may be a reference to the nature and work of πνεῦμα, I am convinced from these three reasons that Jesus uses πνεῦμα as a

⁶⁴In describing the Holy Spirit as a means, I am following Wallace’s use of “means” (*Greek Grammar*, p. 374). Christ is the personal agent who baptizes by the instrument of the Holy Spirit. Though the Holy Spirit is a person, He is being used by Christ as His baptizing instrument.

⁶⁵*NIDNTT*, s.v. “Prepositions and Theology,” 3:1178; see also Dunn, *Baptism*, pp. 8–14; and D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 8:105.

⁶⁶Snodgrass, “Rebirth and Spirit,” p. 17.

⁶⁷This is also recognized by Harris (*NIDNTT*, s.v. “Prepositions and Theology,” 3:1178), Dunn (*Baptism*, p. 190), and Ladd (*A Theology of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], p. 284).

⁶⁸*NIDNTT*, s.v. “γεννάω,” 1:179.

⁶⁹John 1:13; 1 John 2:9; 3:9 (twice); 4:7; 5:1 (twice), 4, 18 (twice).

⁷⁰John 3:6, 8.

⁷¹John 3:6; this use of σάρξ as the object of ἐκ does not violate our point, for that which comes from human procreation is human in nature (see Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, p. 98).

reference to the person of πνεῦμα. However, my point is not to set up an absolute dichotomy between the person of πνεῦμα and the nature imparted as πνεῦμα. In some theological discussions, it is necessary to distinguish between the principle of new spiritual life implanted, regeneration, and the person of the Spirit; however, in contexts focusing on regeneration, as in John 3, regeneration and the Spirit are inseparable. Our contention is that the use of πνεῦμα in v. 5 is the Spirit himself who regenerates. There are two reasons for this contention. First, Jesus maintains in v. 6 that the Spirit produces spiritual life, “that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” It is the Holy Spirit who imparts new spiritual life. Second, an important new covenant context from the Old Testament, Ezekiel 36:26–27, correlates the Spirit with spiritual life. “I [Yahweh] will give you a new heart [לֵב חָדָשׁ] and put [אָנֹכִי] a new spirit [רוּחַ חֲדָשָׁה] within you [בְּקִרְבְּכֶם]” is tantamount to “I will put [אָנֹכִי] My Spirit [רוּחִי] within you [בְּקִרְבְּכֶם].” The parallelism in these two verses suggests an inseparable connection between “new heart,” “new spirit,” and Yahweh’s “Spirit.” Therefore, to be born of πνεύματος is to experience new spiritual life produced by the Holy Spirit.

In summation, Jesus has told Nicodemus in 3:5 that, if one is to enter the kingdom of God, he must be the recipient of the life-giving and purifying work produced by the Spirit. This interpretation was supported by comparing γεννάω, ὕδωρ, and πνεῦμα with other uses in Johannine literature and the Old Testament. Comparing v. 5 with other parallel expressions in the immediate context and two syntactical items in this verse further supported it. As Jesus substantiated his case with Nicodemus, he highlighted theological truth about regeneration from key Old Testament texts. As a recognized Jewish teacher, Nicodemus should have been familiar with eschatological contexts such as Isaiah 44 and Ezekiel 36–37, affirming the cleansing and transformation produced by the Spirit. Jesus clarified for Nicodemus how this applied to him. Consequently, being “born of water and the Spirit” is the Spirit’s work of cleansing from sin and imparting new spiritual life.⁷²

SURVEY OF INTERPRETATIONS

Having examined some of the exegetical and theological aspects of John 3:5, it must now be asked how this verse has been understood by other interpreters. Historically, there have been numerous interpretations of John 3:5.⁷³ We will summarize and evaluate six leading

⁷²*Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, s.v. “New Birth,” by Carl B. Hoch, Jr., pp. 558–59.

⁷³For a good examination of various interpretations, see Belleville, “Born of Water and Spirit,” pp. 125–34.

proposals. The first two views have been dominant interpretations in church history and the last four are interpretations found more currently among interpreters having a high view of bibliology.

Christian Baptism and the Spirit

Many Christian interpreters have interpreted ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος as a reference to the sacrament of Christian baptism and the Holy Spirit. It is argued that Jesus' use of ὕδωρ in John 3:5 would have readily been identified by a first century audience as the waters of baptism. C. H. Dodd reflects this interpretation when he asserts that "the instructed Christian reader would immediately recognize a reference to Baptism, as the sacrament through which the Spirit was given to believers, and by which they were initiated into that new order of life described as the Kingdom of God, which was historically embodied in the Church."⁷⁴

Though some who take "water" as Christian baptism see Jesus' use of ὕδατος as a reference either to His own baptizing ministry (so Dodd)⁷⁵ or to John's (so Lenski),⁷⁶ they are united by maintaining that both Jesus' baptizing ministry and John's are part of the one sacrament of Christian baptism.⁷⁷ Others of a Christian baptism persuasion do not view ὕδατος καὶ as coming from the lips of Jesus, but as a later editorial addition to the text. Those maintaining that this is a subsequent addition to Jesus' words fall into two groups. On the one hand, Bultmann maintains that a subsequent ecclesiastical redactor added ὕδατος καὶ.⁷⁸ On the other hand, Bernard maintains that John himself added this to Jesus' words as an interpretation for the following generation.⁷⁹ Whether

⁷⁴C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 309.

⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 310–11.

⁷⁶R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), pp. 237–38.

⁷⁷Dodd, *Interpretation*, pp. 310–11, and Lenski, *John's Gospel*, p. 23; a secondary reference to baptism is seen by some, such as Brown, *John*, 1:141–42, and Dunn, *Baptism*, pp. 193–94.

⁷⁸Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), p. 139; this has also recently been followed by Ernst Haenchen, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 2 vols., trans. Robert W. Funk, Hermenia, ed. Robert W. Funk with Ulrich Busse (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 1:206.

⁷⁹J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1928), 1:104–5. This is also followed by J. N. Sanders and B. A. Mastin, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1968), p. 124.

ὕδατος καί is genuine to Jesus or a subsequent interpretative addition to Jesus’ words, they are united in their position that ὕδατος is a reference to Christian baptism.

Support for taking ὕδωρ as Christian baptism is drawn from John’s other references to the ordinances. In 1:26–34 the Evangelist highlights the baptizing ministry of John the Baptist. In v. 33 “water” and “Spirit” are closely associated. In 3:22 and 4:1 the baptizing ministry of Jesus and his disciples is also emphasized. Further support for a sacramental understanding is drawn from supposed references to the Lord’s Supper in John 6. For example, Beasley-Murray says: “As in 6:51ff the exposition on eating the flesh of the Son of Man and drinking His blood cannot fail to bring to mind the Lord’s Supper, so the reference to new birth by water and Spirit inevitably directs attention to Christian baptism.”⁸⁰

Many advocates of Christian baptism maintain that there is a close connection between Christian baptism and πνεῦμα as a reference to the Holy Spirit. Some would maintain that the new birth takes place at the time of baptism, while others would see a less rigid association between the new birth and baptism. In the former case, Dodd interprets πνεύματος as a reference to the gift of the Spirit that accompanies Christian baptism.⁸¹ Sanders and Mastin state that John believed that baptism conveyed “the gift of the spirit, as the occasion of the new birth.”⁸² In the latter case, Lenski maintains that “strictly speaking, this repentance (contrition and faith) itself constitutes the rebirth in all adults yet not apart from Baptism which as its seal must follow.”⁸³

In evaluating this position, we should notice that baptism does not fit with the parallelism of this passage. Because “born of water and the Spirit” is parallel with “born from above” in vv. 3, 7 and “born of the Spirit” in vv. 6, 8, this indicates that the emphasis of this passage is on a birth produced by the Spirit. If the emphasis of John 3 is coordinate with the ten uses of “born of God” in 1 John, this further corroborates our interpretation that “born of water and the Spirit” refers to a birth produced by a divine source. This understanding is further supported in v. 8 where Jesus compares the Spirit’s regenerating work with the wind in two ways. First, the Spirit’s work is sovereign, “the wind blows where it wishes.” In regeneration, the Spirit works monergistically, and not synergistically. Second, the Spirit’s life-giving work is mysterious and

⁸⁰G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), pp. 228–29.

⁸¹Dodd, *Interpretation*, p. 311.

⁸²Sanders and Mastin, *St. John*, p. 124.

⁸³Lenski, *John’s Gospel*, p. 238.

invisible: “you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going.” Since water baptism is a visible and comprehensible act, it certainly cannot fit Jesus’ analogy in v. 8. The Spirit’s work in regeneration “is not bound to any external rite such as baptism.”⁸⁴

John’s Baptism and the New Birth

A variation of the Christian baptism position is one that takes ὕδωρ as a reference to John’s baptism and πνεῦμα to the new birth. According to this view, when Nicodemus heard Jesus refer to a birth ἐξ ὕδατος, he would have naturally thought of John’s baptism, for John’s baptism was currently creating an immense reaction in Israel.⁸⁵ Support for this is further drawn from John 1:33 and 3:23. In 1:33 baptism with water and the Spirit are specifically mentioned, and in 3:23 reference is made to John’s baptizing ministry. John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance (Matt 3:11). With this view ὕδατος is an outward symbol of an inward repentance.⁸⁶

Those maintaining this view of ὕδατος interpret the connection between ὕδωρ and πνεῦμα in two different ways. First, some see ὕδωρ, a baptism of repentance, and πνεῦμα, the new birth, as coordinate requirements to enter into the kingdom of God.⁸⁷ With this understanding, ὕδωρ and πνεῦμα are coordinate. Second, others see John’s baptism, though important, as not being sufficient to enter the kingdom of God—there must also be a birth of the Spirit.⁸⁸ This understanding sees a contrast between John’s baptism and birth of the Spirit.

While this proposal suffers from the same deficiencies as the Christian baptism proposal, it does provide more immediate contextual support, as the references to John’s baptism in 1:33 and 3:23 reflect. However, this contextual support is tangential rather than substantive.⁸⁹

⁸⁴Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 3:96.

⁸⁵Frederick Louis Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978), p. 379.

⁸⁶B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 49–50; see also Gary M. Burge, *The Anointed Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 162–63.

⁸⁷Westcott, *John*, pp. 49–50.

⁸⁸William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 1:134.

⁸⁹Larry P. Jones, *The Symbol of Water in the Gospel of John* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 71.

The point of the references to John’s baptism is not to emphasize its importance, but rather to stress its comparative insignificance, as clearly presented in 1:23, 26, and 3:30.⁹⁰

The Word of God and the Spirit

This view maintains that there are two necessary elements in the new birth: the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. Boice summarizes his understanding of this passage in this way: “When we see Christ’s words in this light, we see that God is here pictured as the Divine Begetter, the Father of His spiritual children, and we learn that the written Word of God together with the working of His Holy Spirit is the means by which the new birth is accomplished.”⁹¹ This metaphorical significance of ὕδωρ is seen in Ephesians 5:26 where Paul writes that Christ gave himself for the church “that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water [τοῦ ὕδατος] with the word.” The new birth is further connected with the Word of God in passages such as 1 Peter 1:23, “for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God.” Further support is drawn from James 1:18, “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we might be, as it were, the first fruits among His creatures.”⁹²

Though we agree that the Holy Spirit uses the Word of God in regenerating the totally depraved sinner, this verse does not emphasize the Spirit’s use of the Word of God in the same manner as 1 Peter 1:23. Since seven of the eight uses of ὕδωρ in John picture spiritual vivification, it follows that the eighth use in 3:5 would also be taken in a similar manner. Though Ephesians 5:26 provides support for taking “water” as the Word [ῥῆμα] of God, it seems more likely that Jesus would have used ῥῆμα, as He does in John 6:63, instead of ὕδωρ.⁹³

Natural Birth and the New Birth

This view argues that ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος refer to both a

⁹⁰Belleville, “Born of Water and Spirit,” p. 127.

⁹¹James M. Boice, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), p. 175.

⁹²Homer A. Kent, Jr., *Light in the Darkness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), p. 60. This view is also supported by Herman A. Hoyt, *The New Birth* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing, 1961), pp. 47–51; and Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1945), 1:110–11. For a variation of this view, where ὕδωρ is taken to be a reference to the Torah, see the citations in Belleville, “Born of Water and Spirit,” p. 130.

⁹³Hodges, “Water and Spirit,” pp. 214–15.

natural birth and a spiritual birth. In order to enter the kingdom of God, it is necessary for one to be physically born and, subsequently, to experience a spiritual birth. This view is supported by connecting ὕδωρ with the amniotic fluid that surrounds an unborn child in its mother's womb and ruptures at delivery,⁹⁴ or by taking it as a metaphor for semen.⁹⁵ Witherington draws upon Proverbs 5:15–18 and Canticles 4:12–15 to demonstrate that water is a metaphor for fecundity and reproduction.⁹⁶ Contextual support in John 3 is drawn from Nicodemus's reference to a mother's womb in v. 4 and Jesus' apparent interpretation of ὕδατος in v. 6, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." In support of this understanding, Laney has stated:

In Jesus' analogy, then, the fleshly, or natural, birth corresponds to being "born of water." During pregnancy the unborn child floats in the amniotic fluid within the mother's womb. During delivery, this water is expelled. The child is literally born "out of water" (*ek hudatos*). The expression "of water" is used here as a figure for physical birth.⁹⁷

However, this view presents some syntactical problems. The syntactical linkage using one preposition to govern two coordinated nouns affirms that one birth associated with "water" and "Spirit" is in view. This syntactical linkage poses a problem if two births, natural and spiritual, are in view. Advocates of this view circumvent this syntactical problem and point to v. 6 to support their view, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." The problem with this is that there is a conjunctive relationship between "water" and "Spirit" in v. 5, and a contrastive relationship between "flesh" and "Spirit" in v. 6. Consequently, "water" in v. 5 cannot be equated with "flesh" in v. 6.⁹⁸

Double Metaphor for the New Birth

⁹⁴Russell Fowler, "Born of Water and the Spirit (John 3⁵)," *Expository Times* 82 (February 1971): 159, and D. G. Spriggs, "Meaning of 'Water' in John 3⁵," *Expository Times* 85 (February 1974): 149–50.

⁹⁵This is mentioned as a possibility by Ben Witherington III, "The Waters of Birth: John 3.5 and 1 John 5.6–8," *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989): 156. A variation of this view is that "water" represents spiritual semen or seed, see Hugo Odeberg, *The Fourth Gospel* (Amsterdam: B. R. Grüner, 1968), pp. 48–71.

⁹⁶Witherington, "The Waters of Birth," pp. 155–60; see also Margaret Pamment, "Short Notes," *Novum Testamentum* 25 (April 1983): 189–90.

⁹⁷J. Carl Laney, *John* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), p. 78.

⁹⁸Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1996), p. 170.

Another recent interpretation of John 3:5 understands that the new birth is pictured by two metaphors of “water” and “wind” (πνεῦμα). This is the position of Zane Hodges, who argues that ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος should be consistently translated in their “most natural semantic association.... The association of ‘water and wind’ as elements in the physical world is one that is both readily and frequently made.”⁹⁹ Water and wind are used in the Old Testament as metaphors to picture the quickening work of the Holy Spirit, “water” in Isaiah 44:3–5 and “wind” in Ezekiel 37:9–10.¹⁰⁰ Support for interpreting πνεῦμα as “wind” is found in 3:8 where πνεῦμα is used twice, translated respectively as “wind” and “spirit.”¹⁰¹

Though there are some commendable elements in Hodges’ proposal, his discussion of πνεῦμα is unconvincing. The Johannine use of πνεῦμα is based upon Old Testament material focusing on the Spirit’s life-giving work. In John πνεῦμα is consistently used in the sense of “spirit.” The only exception to this pattern is where contextual evidence would clearly demand otherwise. Such a case is found in 3:8. Since πνεῦμα is the subject of the verb πνεῖ (“blows”), πνεῦμα must be taken as a reference to “wind.” However, πνεῦμα in v. 6 could not make sense if it were not used in its normal sense of “spirit.” In fact, the use of πνεῦμα in v. 6 with its consistent sense of “spirit” is what prepares for Jesus’ analogical argument where “wind” pictures “spirit.”¹⁰² Consequently, Hodges interpretation of πνεύματος in 3:5 as “wind” is improbable.

Purification and the New Birth

This position interprets ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος as a reference to the purifying and life-giving work of the Holy Spirit. According to this position, Jesus tightly connects ὕδωρ and πνεῦμα to remind Nicodemus of key aspects of Old Testament eschatological promises that focus on God’s purifying and transforming activity on behalf of his people.¹⁰³ The terms “water” and “spirit” are used in Ezekiel 36:25–27 to stress the Spirit’s future purification of His nation.¹⁰⁴ Though the Old Testament

⁹⁹Hodges, “Water and Spirit,” p. 216.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., pp. 217–18.

¹⁰¹Ibid., p. 216.

¹⁰²Carson, *John*, pp. 193–94.

¹⁰³John Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), p. 96; Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, p. 96; Belleville, “Born of Water and Spirit,” p. 134.

¹⁰⁴Bruce, *John*, p. 84.

promises are primarily related to the nation, advocates of this view maintain that this certainly presupposes that the Spirit would regenerate individuals.¹⁰⁵ Jesus' dropping of the concept of water and, consequently, emphasizing only the Spirit's work in vv. 6–15 further supports this view.¹⁰⁶

While advocates of this position agree that ὕδωρ is used figuratively for the Spirit's work in cleansing and renewal, the interpretation of πνεῦμα can be taken either as a reference to the implanting of God's nature as spirit,¹⁰⁷ or to the Spirit.¹⁰⁸ Though these are two viable interpretations of πνεῦμα, the evidence suggests that it is preferable to interpret πνεῦμα as a reference to the Holy Spirit. In the final analysis, this view appears to harmonize best with the exegetical and theological details associated with John 3:5.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article has been to determine the meaning of “born of water and the Spirit” in John 3:5. Initially, we examined the key concepts and literary context. We next surveyed and evaluated six interpretations of this phrase. From our examination, we understand that Jesus' description of the new birth has two aspects: purification and transformation. Three reasons support this interpretation. First, it harmonizes with the literary context of John 3. Second, this interpretation is consistent with the Johannine use of γεννάω, ὕδωρ, and πνεῦμα. Finally, Jesus' berating Nicodemus in John 3:10 for his failure to comprehend the Old Testament indicates that the new birth is predicated upon the Old Testament. John 3:5 has an informing foundation in Ezekiel 36:25–27 where “water” and “Spirit” are used in parallel. The coordinate relationship between John 3:5 and Ezekiel 36:25–27 demonstrates that “water” is a cleansing from sin, and that God's “Spirit” transforms the heart. In commenting on John 3:5, Murray has appropriately summarized Ezekiel's influence:

These elements, the purificatory and the renovatory, must not be regarded as separable events. They are simply the aspects which are constitutive of this total change by which the called of God are translated from death to life and from the kingdom of Satan into God's kingdom, a change which provides for all the exigencies of our past condition and the demands of the

¹⁰⁵Carson, *John*, p. 195.

¹⁰⁶Belleville, “Born of Water and Spirit,” p. 134.

¹⁰⁷So Belleville, “Born of Water and Spirit,” p. 140; and Carson, *John*, p. 195.

¹⁰⁸A few supporters are Murray (*Redemption*, pp. 96–104), Hoekema (*Saved by Grace*, pp. 96–98), and Ladd (*Theology*, p. 284).

new life in Christ, a change which removes the contradiction of sin and fits for the fellowship of God’s son.¹⁰⁹

Therefore, we conclude that “born of water and the Spirit” refers to the life-giving and purifying activity of the Spirit.

¹⁰⁹Murray, *Redemption*, p. 100.

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, For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. Jesus continued by further emphasizing that this spiritual cleansing is wholly a work of God, and not the result of human effort: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Just as only human nature can beget human nature, so also only the Holy Spirit can effect spiritual transformation. John develops this meaning early in his gospel, contrasting water that is used in ritual and tradition with a higher, heavenly water offered in Jesus. John the Baptist's Testimony (1:19-34): John says Jesus' baptism in the Holy Spirit surpasses his baptism in water. Water here is the medium of a traditional ritual of purification. But Jesus in a comparative and a contrasting sense baptizes with the Holy Spirit (i.e. water from above). Given room to maneuver, immediate context points to water symbolizing the Spirit. "Born of water and Spirit" occurs as a reiteration of John 3:3's phrase "born again". The word, "again" possess two meanings. Though Nicodemus translates the word as "a second time," the word also means "from above." It is this later interpretation, which Jesus seems to intend. John 3:3-8 (NIV). Notice that after Jesus says that we must be born of "water and the Spirit", he immediately contrasts flesh and Spirit. In the context, Jesus is answering Nicodemus's concern that he must be born "again". In one sentence, he mentions two births: water and Spirit. And in the next sentence, he again mentions two births: flesh and Spirit. The most natural interpretation is that flesh and water are referring to the same birth. In addition, notice that Jesus says "So it is with everyone born of the Spirit". If he were intending to say that everyo