

## **EXEGETICAL STUDY OF JOHN 3.3-5 AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIAN BAPTISM**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of the essay is to investigate the significance of John 3.3-5 for comprehending Christian baptism. The exegetical method of study and document analysis were both used by the author to conduct the research. According to the study's findings, John 3.3-5's theological interpretation emphasizes the necessity of the idea that baptism involves more than just being initiated into the church; it also involves spiritual regeneration. Because the phrase "born of the spirit" in John 3.5, 6, and 8 is similar to the phrase "born of God" in 1.13, it is generally clear that water baptism and spiritual rebirth were inseparable in the early church.

**Keywords:** Baptism, Born of Water, Born of God, Regeneration, Spiritual Rebirth

### **Introduction**

The Gospel of John is one of the four canonical Gospels that contain Jesus Christ's teachings and life on earth. In John 3:3-5, Jesus speaks with Nicodemus, a Jewish Pharisee, about the need to be "born again" to enter God's kingdom. This passage is important for understanding Christian baptism because it emphasizes the importance of spiritual rebirth through water and the Holy Spirit. This study seeks to examine the text in its historical and literary context, as well as its theological significance for Christian baptismal doctrine. Also, the study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning and implications of Jesus' words for the practice of Christian baptism by closely examining the original Greek language, the cultural and religious context of the time, and the literary structure of the passage. The paper

will shed light on the symbolic and sacramental aspects of Christian baptism by examining the significance of water and the Holy Spirit in the context of spiritual rebirth. It will also look at how this passage has been interpreted and applied throughout Christian history, as well as how it continues to influence our understanding of baptism today.

John 3:3-5 falls within one of the dialogue accounts recorded by John in the Fourth Gospel. This is part of Jesus' engagement with some individuals in a conversion that culminated in a spiritual offer. The meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus highlights some theological issues that demand attention. Grail O'Day states that the text of John 3 begins by introducing Nicodemus as a Pharisee and a member of a Jewish ruling council. A man whose identity in a community is closely bound (55). Sandra Schneiders holds that some commentators see Nicodemus as a

representative of either those Jews who did not accept Jesus when he came to the world, or of those whose faith was inadequate, or even of those who knew who Jesus was but would not confess him openly because of fear of persecution from the Jews religious leaders (190). Bryan Born alludes to the Pharisaic group in which Nicodemus was a member as being critical of both John the Baptist (John 1:24) and Jesus (John 2:18) (7). The teacher of the law expresses his thought about Jesus and the works Jesus was doing. To him, no one can perform the signs that Jesus was doing unless God is with him. In his response, Jesus states that unless one is born anew (gennhgh/ ajvwnqen), one cannot see the kingdom of God (John 3:3).

O'Day argues that this verse centres around two expressions, to be born anew and to see the kingdom of God, and the expression "born anew" is much more complex than contemporary usage would indicate. The complexity stems from the Greek word *ajvwnqen*, which means both "from above" and "again, anew" (55-56). William C. Grese supports the view that the phrase *gennhgh`nai ajvwnqen* is ambiguous. It may mean either "born again" or "born from above," but in this context, it means both (691). O'Day further states that the word *ajvwnqen* is a word with an innate double meaning, and in the Johannine writings, Jesus intentionally superimposes both meanings in this text. Unless one recognizes the intentional verbal ambiguity to be born "from above," or "again, anew," one will not be able to understand the richness of the new life Jesus offers (56). Commenting on this, John B. Polhill alludes to *ajvwnqen* as one of those Johannine double-entendres that carry the meaning of both "again" and "from above," a concept which is a common characteristic of John (542). Nicodemus seems to understand only one level of the meaning of this concept *ajvwnqen*, which informs his reaction with disbelief and

rejection in v. 4 while Jesus has already moved the conversation to a deeper level.

### The Text

John 3:3 Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

John 3:4 Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?

John 3:5 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

This pericope has been misunderstood and misinterpreted by some in a variety of ways. Some scholars have either directly or indirectly alluded that this pericope can be interpreted in connection to Christian baptism commanded by Jesus Christ (Matt 28.19-20) and which took effect post-Pentecost in Acts 2. On the other hand, others have dismissed this view and believe that the text has nothing to do with Christian baptism. The question then is, to what extent should readers of John 3.3-5 connect Jesus' words to Nicodemus with the nature of baptism post-Pentecost? Therefore, this paper assumes that Jesus' words to Nicodemus in John 3.3-5 were not referencing Christian baptism since the Holy Spirit had not yet been given (John 7:39).

### The Concept of Born Again *ajvwnqen* and its Connection to Christian Baptism

The word *ajvwnqen* is the key to Nicodemus' dilemma (Inge 84). Grail O'Day without mincing words states that the invitation to be "born again" in John 3.3 is very much similar to the words of John 1.12 to be born "from above" to a "new identity" to become a new person as a child of God (56). Le Frois posits that *ajvwnqen* invariably has the meaning of "from above" and is always depicted as a birth from God (1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1) (117).

He insists, the “birth of man is supernatural birth from God, and the birth from God is a supernatural rebirth of man” (117). Similarly, D. A. Carson argues, “‘To be born again’ or ‘to be born from above must mean the same thing as ‘to become children of God,’ to be ‘born of God,’ by believing in the name of the incarnate Word” (126).

Commenting on this, William Grese cites Meeks when he points out that Nicodemus’ “questioning concerning how one can enter the womb of one’s mother for a second time shows that he has failed to understand Jesus’ message” (169). C. K. Barrett is critical when he states that Nicodemus is uncomprehending and incredulous despite his professional knowledge of the Old Testament which should have prepared and placed him on a solid standing of the discourse (203). Ringe aptly captures this scene when he states that the problem is not just that Nicodemus understands it one way, while Jesus is using it with the opposite meaning. Ringe maintains that “The problem is that Nicodemus understands neither the nature of the Paraclete nor the life involved in the realm or sovereignty of God and thus does not recognize the real identity of the one with whom he is speaking”(8). Annette Weissenrieder states that “there seems to be an interplay between a medical and a theological understanding of being born again and it is clear that Nicodemus refers to a medical-literal understanding of birth” than the theological perspective which Jesus is referring to.

To move Nicodemus out of his misunderstanding, Jesus explains the idea of being born again as being “born of water and the spirit,” the expression that O’Day states must be interpreted carefully (57). Contemplating as to which side of the divide this argument falls, O’Day succinctly declares:

There is no doubt that for the reader of this gospel in the Johannine community, the reference to water and Spirit would have been heard as a reference to new birth through baptism. Since, however, an allusion to baptism would be both a theological and literary anachronism within the context of the narrative of John 3 itself, one must ask whether this sacramental allusion is the only way to make sense of the reference to water and Spirit. That is, the narrative presupposes a listener, Nicodemus, who would hear these words independent of any knowledge of Christian baptism. Are Jesus’ words about new life through water and the Spirit comprehensible before the baptismal referent is added? (57).

He then, therefore answers this question both in the affirmative and in the negative. The combination of water and Spirit in John 3:5 echoes the Old Testament imagery (Ezek 36:25-26; Isa 44:3). O’Day maintains that Jesus’ words about births from water and Spirit are comprehensive without the baptismal referent if the verb “born” is carefully attended to. Nicodemus envisions birth as that which one exists from the mother’s womb and suddenly the breaking of the waters of birth announces the imminent birth or arrival of a child (57-58). In the same vein, Barrett thinks that water and spirit in this context can best be explained that a “man must be born not of earthly but of spiritual semen” (209). Carroll Osburn dismisses this view when he states that there is no necessity to agree with Barrett that “by water” refers to semen (134).

Polhill argues that given the more explicit way, Jesus explains this rebirth in v. 5, “baptism, however, is the most natural interpretation, given the characteristic association of baptism and the gift of the Spirit

which runs throughout the New Testament”(452). Again, he maintains that v. 5 should also be seen in the spectrum of John’s use of imagery, especially as water reappears as that life-giving force that comes within in chapter 4(452). Contributing to this debate, Karl Olav Sandness holds that the two “unless ...” sentences vv. 3, 5 make birth *ajvwnqen* or the birth of water and the spirit a basic requirement (156). In a similar vein, Gerald Janzen argues that in his dialogue with Nicodemus, “Jesus connects rebirth implicitly with baptism as involving water and spirit” (337).

Author Canales on the other hand, argues that although Catholics tend to use, prefer and enjoy using the term, “born from above” as distinct from “born-again.” But he argues vehemently that it is entirely possible and highly probable that Jesus fully intended the actual meaning to be “born-again” and not “from above” (99-100). Giving the theological interpretation of the text, Canales states:

Theologically, and according to the text, every person is capable of two births: a physical birth and a spiritual birth. The physical birth is an earthly birth that allows all people the capability to enter into the material world, a world of sin, suffering, sickness, darkness, death, a world of the flesh. The spiritual birth is a new birth in God, which offers all people the opportunity to enter into the Kingdom of God, a realm of truth, light, forgiveness, and most importantly, the ability to discern that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, an earthly and fleshly human being can become “born-again.” Hence, there is a significant distinction between the flesh and the Spirit (100-101).

He again elaborates on this view that the theological interpretation of being “born again” in v. 5 of the pericope is nothing more

than just “the reality of accepting Jesus as the Christ”(101). Furthermore, he opines that sacramentally, the text could best be interpreted thus: “In order truly to experience God a person must be ‘born-again’ of water and the Spirit, not merely going through the motions of a Jewish purification water-rite nor by John the Baptist’s water-bath cleansing, but by both water-bath ritual and encountering the Spirit”(107). In his interaction with the works of some other scholars, Canales states that a few theologians have argued that the originality and authenticity of verse 5 in the text, concerning baptism is in doubt. The debate is whether or not to consider “of water” as being said by Jesus or if it was added by the author of the Fourth Gospel or even some other redactors. Canals and some scholars see the entire dialogue and discourse in the text as purely Johannine composition (108).

Again, Canales states that Rudolf Bultmann concludes that the concept “‘of water’ is the contribution of an ecclesiastical redactor who was attempting intentionally to introduce liturgical and sacramental theology and praxis within the Gospel” (108). He adds that for Raymond E. Brown, “there is no textual evidence whatsoever against the genuineness of the phrase ‘of water’ within the text.” While the Jesus Seminar holds that the story is a typical Johannine construction... and the entire scene belongs to the imagination of the storyteller (108).

On the contrary, Carson holds that “born of water and the Spirit” supports the view, which refers to two births, one natural and the other supernatural. The natural “refers to the amniotic fluid that breaks from the womb shortly before childbirth or to stand metaphorically for semen,” while supernatural birth refers to a Christian sacrament. He, therefore, concludes that many find “water” a reference to Christian baptism (128). Chang Hui Kang argues that the interpretation that

“water” in this text refers to ordinary birth does not carry any conviction (176). He cites Carl Laney who reinforces the argument thus:

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 (174).

Carson reiterates the point that the “simple word ‘water’ is understood by the majority of contemporary commentators to refer to Christian baptism, though there is little agreement amongst them on the relation between ‘water’ and ‘Spirit’” and some accordingly suggest the Spirit effects new birth through water which is baptism (132). Grese argues that the new birth in this context is connected with baptism (686). He stresses that even “the early readers would still have understood this passage as a reference to baptism” (687). He also affirms that the “interpretation of rebirth in John 3 as a reference to baptism is underlined by the references to baptism in the surrounding text. Jesus explains the need for baptism/rebirth in vv. 3-6, and in v. 22 he makes this baptism/rebirth available” (687). Sandra M. Schneiders also agrees that the birth “from above” is birth through baptism (193). Similarly, David Croteau thinks that John 3:5 has been interpreted by some as a reference to Christian baptism (110). John Collins agrees no less with this view when he states that there is a sense to believe that John 3:5 does indeed have “baptismal implication since John the Baptist was employing a ceremony with water.” If the Christian church today adapts John’s ceremony to Christian baptism, then the common Christian reading of John 3:5 as referring to Christian baptism has an explanation (85).

Carson on the other hand balances the argument when he states that a variation on this view is that the ‘water’ in the context of John 3 refers not to Christian baptism but John’s baptism. But again he queries that if “John’s baptism lies behind ‘water’ in 3:5, would not this suggest that Jesus was making the Baptist’s rite a requirement for entrance into the kingdom, even though that rite was short to be superseded by Christian baptism?” (129). Le Frois equally states that for entrance into the Kingdom of God which is the Family of God, Jesus demands of Nicodemus with a clear repeated emphasis of a rebirth unto a new life has nothing to do with the ordinary birth of a man in a carnal manner. This birth is a spiritual one. It is a supernatural birth from God. The inhabitants of the Kingdom are regenerated by the Spirit of God, through the instrumentality of the visible and material element which is water. This is a new and wonderful thing Jesus had in mind which with time will come to be called “the great sacrament of baptism”(117-18).

Le Frois maintains this line of thinking when he states unequivocally that the water in this passage is not to be taken to mean a mere metaphor and anyone who interprets this as a mere metaphor and not what the Council of Trent solemnly defines as a necessity of true and natural water for baptism then such a one “suffers shipwreck from the faith” (118). Reiterating the meaning of water in John 3 Le Frois mince no words when he states:

As Naaman was rejuvenated by the waters of the Jordan, so that his flesh became the flesh of a little child (4 Kgs 5:14), so Christ wished to make use of the visible and material element of water to bring about man’s rejuvenation and his rebirth in God. By the all-powerful Spirit of God, the waters obtain the power of regenerating man to God, Spirit and



water united in most intimate activity, the water being the chosen instrument of the Spirit to vivify and transform the world (118).

Collaborating with this view, T. C. Smith points out that “born out of water and Spirit” seems to be more easily explained if viewed from John’s baptism (446). He cites Hoskyns when he states that “the immediate background for a close relationship between water and spirit is supplied by the relation between Jesus and John the Baptist (1:26, 31-34).” By this Jesus shows the necessity for the Pharisees to submit to John’s baptism which was for repentance and therefore “looks forward to the baptism of the Spirit which would come after the resurrection of Jesus when the age of the Spirit was inaugurated, bringing about the possibility of birth from above”(447). It should also be noted that when John wrote this Gospel, Christian baptism had been practised for several decades but of course, that was not in view when Jesus spoke with Nicodemus. Meanwhile, it is not quite certain if the Evangelist expected his readers to detect some secondary allusions to Christian baptism in v. 5 (129).

Eugene R. Schlesinger in an article entitled, “Use Your Allusion: How Reformed Sacramental Theology Makes Sense of Sacramental Language in John 3 and 6” presents arguments held by some scholars to object that John 3:3-5 alludes to Christian baptism. He mentions that the arguments mainly hinge on two points, namely: the historical setting and the strength of language (356). The first objection borders on the historical setting which states that in the context of Jesus’ public ministry, it makes little sense for him to refer to sacraments that have not yet been established since in doing so his audiences could not have understood his meaning (356). Secondly, the language of Jesus in this context would have undermined the “biblical doctrine of salvation by grace

alone through faith alone,” by establishing another means through which salvation could be attained (356-57). To some, the reference in John 3:5 to be “born of water and spirit” is a reference to baptism, but “of water” was not original, rather it was an interpolation by an ‘ecclesiastical redactor’(357). Similarly, L. Jayachitra posits that “it is possible that water may be a later addition, which may have been incorporated to make Christian baptism significant for the Johannine community” (120). On the other hand, Ben Witherington argues, “the assumption of later insertion of *ejx uJvdato~* into the text is a conjecture for which there is no textual support” (159). Robert V. McCabe argues strongly that “whether *uJvdato~ kai* is genuine to Jesus or a subsequent interpretative addition to Jesus’ words, they are united in their view that *uJvdato~* is a reference to Christian baptism” (100-01).

Reacting to the objections presented above by Schlesinger as argued by some scholars, Zane Hodges states, “Nothing requires that in John 3:5 the words ‘born of water’ should imply baptism, unless the expositor is already committed to a sacramental orientation to Christian experience”(211). Hence, he agrees with the view of some scholars that the word “water” is used symbolically rather than naturally (215).

Schlesinger likewise, systematically spurns these objections and posits that these objections are valid only if one presupposes a radical discontinuity between John the Baptist’s baptism and Christian baptism, which he does not believe if the New Testament will sustain this very position. While there could be obvious discontinuities between the two rites, they remain connected. If anything, one ought to expect that Christian baptism will be richer, and fuller than John’s and the two are interconnected in a way (358). Barrett holds that from the context of this

pericope, it seems highly probable that when John speaks of water, he has in mind not only John's baptism but also Christian's baptism, "which is often (though not always) represented in the New Testament as how Spirit is conferred" (209). For Chang Hui Kang, "the predominant view among scholars seems to be that uJvdwr in John 3:5 refers to Christian baptism" (67). Similarly, Linda Belleville states that "the predominant view among scholars seems to be that uJvdwr in John 3:5 cannot possibly mean anything else but the water of Christian baptism" (128).

Timothy Foster points out that the construction gennhqr/ ejx ujvdato~ kaiV pneuvmato~ in v. 5 is controversial as some scholars see the two parts as having unity of a sort by the use of a conjunction kai thereby connecting the "born of water" with that of "the spirit" as one. But some other scholars have objected to this view and state that v. 5 "describes two events rather than birth by a single water-spirit source" (351-57). For instance, Yung Suk Kim observes that to be "born of water" is a separate birth from that of "the spirit." For him, to be "'born of water' evokes the image of water baptism rather than physical birth" (23). He pushes further that when people repent, they submit themselves to be baptized with water. And therefore, baptism simply means surrendering to God and having a new determination to live a new life. "But 'born of water' is more than water baptism. Whereas the latter occurs one time, the former means one yields to God continuously. That is, one's new spiritual birth is not complete with one action of water baptism" (23).

Foster opines that the interpretation of John 3:5 is numerous, but they can be divided into two broad categories: the ritualistic and the non-ritualistic approaches. While the ritualistic view considers "born of water" to be a reference to baptism, either to that of John or

Jesus or to a Proselyte or the Christian baptism, the non-ritualistic view pictures "born of water" as the most common physiological birth or at best seek to make allusions to the Old Testament (352). To illustrate this view, Foster cites Witherington who suggests that "in 3:5 water refers to physical birth, and spirit refers to birth from the Holy Spirit" (352). Foster concludes that a consensus view is possible if ujvdato~ kaiV pneuvmato~ is taken as an "allusion to Ezek 36:25-27, where water and spirit come together so forcefully, the first to signify cleansing from impurity, and the second to depict the transformation of heart that will enable people to follow God wholly"(353).

Belleville brilliantly states that the style and syntax of v. 5 in the text shows that ujvdwr kaiV pneu`ma is "governed by a single preposition (ejk) and conjoined by kaiV indicating that the phrase is to be viewed as a conceptual unity, viz., 'water-spirit'"(134-35). Foster re-states that some scholars object to this view and argue that while Israel is called "God's firstborn," "it is a son-ship based on covenant choice, not due to divine procreation" (356) hence, this allusion cannot connect well with this pericope. He argues further that "the Christology of the passage answers the ecclesiological question of the relationship between Israel and the church rather than the soteriological issue of the prerequisites for personal salvation" (356).

### **Conclusion**

The back-and-forth argument of scholars about the meaning and significance of John 3:3-5 is highly engaging and exciting. In as much as each scholar's view is appreciated and respected, it is out of place to leave the view of this paper dangling on the fence. Given this, surmise that the significance of water in this pericope may have been about John's baptism, it is, however, worthy of note that at the time of John's writings, his primary readers, could have observed some elements

of resonance between this passage and Christian baptism. Robinson equally observes that it is “difficult to take any other reference than baptism in the word *ejx uJvdato~*” and “if the words *ejx uJvdato~* are original . . . no Christian reader could have understood them except as an allusion to baptism” (15). Also, it is highly improbable to believe that the early church interpreted being “born of water” as different from being “born of the spirit” as is alleged by some scholars. The inseparability of water baptism and spiritual rebirth in the early church is essentially clear because the expression “born of the spirit” in John 3:5, 6, 8 is similar to the expression “born of God” in 1:13(134-36). The theological interpretation of John 3:3-5 underscores the necessity of the view that baptism is more than an act of initiating one into the church but also entails spiritual regeneration (Robinson 136).

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