The Gospel According to JOHN

D. A. CARSON

This book is gratefully dedicated to Kenneth and Ruth Kantzer

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3:4. Nicodemus’s incredulous response is part of a recurring pattern of misunderstanding followed by further explanation in this Gospel (cf. notes on 2:20). It is far from certain Nicodemus was quite as obtuse as a casual reading of his response might suggest (cf. Meyer, 1. 163, ‘of a somewhat slow temperament’: is this likely of ‘Israel’s teacher’ [3:10]?). Some have wondered if he was purposely setting a metaphorical problem against a metaphorical challenge—i.e. he understood that Jesus was demanding some sort of transformation of an individual’s entire character, but he could not see how an old man, decisively shaped by his heritage and firmly set in his ways, could possibly turn the clock back and start all over again as a new person. He could not possibly enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born! This reconstruction is too subtle, and ignores the theme of the kingdom of God, introduced by Jesus’ challenge (v. 3). For a man like Nicodemus, entering the kingdom of God did not have to do with the transformation of an individual’s character but with participation in the resurrection life of the new order God would powerfully bring about at the end of history. There is no evidence he was wistfully feeling the force of Tennyson’s famous sigh, ‘Ah for a man to arise in me / That the man I am may cease to be.’

A more realistic view is that Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus was talking about at all. At this point he could not believe (v.12) that new birth was a requirement for entrance into the kingdom and was amazed (v. 7) by the very category. His response in v. 4 is therefore marked with incredulosity, which prompts him to reply with a crassly literalistic interpretation of what Jesus said, as a way of expressing a certain degree of scorn. Even his decision to take anōthen (v.3) to mean ‘again’ or a second time may be part of that determined literalism.5

3:5. Whatever the nature and degree of Nicodemus’s misunderstanding, Jesus sets about to restate his challenge in slightly different form (v. 5), and with expansive comment (vv. 6–8). Again there is the solemn formula I tell you the truth (cf. notes on 1:51). This time no-one can enter the kingdom of God displaces ‘no-one can see the kingdom of God’ (v. 3). The meaning is much the same; inability even to ‘enter’ may be slightly stronger than inability to ‘see’ (i.e. experience). But the crucial difference in the wording is the change from ‘born anōthen ’ (‘from above’ or ‘again’) to born of water and the Spirit. These words have generated a host of interpretations, the most important of which may be summarized as follows:

(1) Noting that v.6 describes two births, one from flesh to flesh and the other from Spirit to Spirit, some interpreters propose that ‘born of water and the Spirit’ similarly refers to two births, one natural and the other supernatural. Natural procreation is not enough; there must be a second birth, a second begetting, this one of the Spirit. To support this view, ‘water’ has been understood to refer to the amniotic fluid that breaks from the womb shortly before childbirth, or to stand metaphorically for semen. But there are no ancient sources that picture natural birth as ‘from water’, and the few that use ‘drops’ to stand for semen are rare and late. It is true that in sources relevant to the Fourth Gospel water can be associated with fecundity and procreation in a general way (e.g. Song 4:12–13; Pr. 5:15–18), but none is tied quite so clearly to semen or to amniotic fluid as to make the connection here an obvious one. The Greek construction does not favour two births here. Moreover the entire expression ‘of water and the Spirit’ cries out to be read as the equivalent of anōthen, ‘from above’, if there is genuine parallelism between v. 3 and v. 5, and this too argues that the expression should be taken as a reference to but one birth, not two.

(2) Many find in ‘water’ a reference to Christian baptism (e.g. Brown, 2. 139–141). For Bultmann (pp. 138–139 n. 3) and others who have followed him, this is so embarrassing that he suggests the words ‘water and’ were not part of the original text, but added by a later ecclesiastical editor much more interested in Christian ritual than the Evangelist himself. There is no textual support for the omission. At the other end of the spectrum, Vellanickal (pp. 170ff.) suggests that when the Evangelist received this account there was no mention of water, but that he added it to provide an explicit reference to the rite of Christian initiation. Added or not, 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’. After all, reference is made in the near context to Jesus’ own baptismal ministry (3:22; 4:1), and John has connected water and Spirit in a baptismal context before (1:33, 34). Moreover John’s alleged interest in sacraments in ch. 6 encourages the suspicion he is making a sacramental allusion here. Many accordingly suggest the Spirit effects new birth through water (= baptism) (e.g. Ferrarro, Spirito, pp. 59–67).

Those who adopt this position, of course, are forced to admit that John’s words could have had no relevance to the historical Nicodemus. This part of the account, at least, becomes a narrative fiction designed to instruct the church on the importance of baptism. What is not always recognized is that this theory makes the Evangelist an extraordinarily incompetent story-teller, since in v. 10 he pictures Jesus berating Nicodemus for not understanding these things. If water = baptism is so important for entering the kingdom, it is surprising that the rest of the discussion never mentions it again: the entire focus is on the work of the Spirit (v. 8), the work of the Son (vv.14–15), the work of God himself (vv.16–17), and the place of faith (vv.15–16). The analogy between the mysterious wind and the sovereign work of the Spirit (v. 8) becomes very strange if Spirit-birth is tied so firmly to baptism. Some doubt if there is any explicit reference to the eucharist in John 6 (cf. notes on 6:25ff.), casting doubt on the supposition that the Evangelist is deeply interested in sacramental questions. If he were, it is surprisingly strange that he fails to make explicit connections, neglecting even to mention the institution of the Lord’s supper. The Spirit plays a powerful role in John 14–16; 20:22, but there is no hint of baptism. Moreover the allusions to Jesus’ baptismal activity (3:22; 4:1), far from fostering sacramentalism, explicitly divert attention elsewhere (cf. notes on 3:25–26; 4:2; 6:22ff.). The conjunction of water and Spirit in 1:26, 33 is no support for this position, as there the two are contrasted, whereas in 3:5 they are co-ordinated.

The entire view seems to rest on an unarticulated prejudice that every mention of water evoked instant recognition, in the minds of first-century readers, that this theory makes the Evangelist an extraordinarily incompetent story-teller, since in v. 10 he pictures Jesus berating Nicodemus for not understanding these things. If water = baptism is so important for entering the kingdom, it is surprising that the rest of the discussion never mentions it again: the entire focus is on the work of the Spirit (v. 8), the work of the Son (vv.14–15), the work of God himself (vv.16–17), and the place of faith (vv.15–16). The analogy between the mysterious wind and the sovereign work of the Spirit (v. 8) becomes very strange if Spirit-birth is tied so firmly to baptism. Some doubt if there is any explicit reference to the eucharist in John 6 (cf. notes on 6:25ff.), casting doubt on the supposition that the Evangelist is deeply interested in sacramental questions. If he were, it is surprisingly strange that he fails to make explicit connections, neglecting even to mention the institution of the Lord’s supper. The Spirit plays a powerful role in John 14–16; 20:22, but there is no hint of baptism. Moreover the allusions to Jesus’ baptismal activity (3:22; 4:1), far from fostering sacramentalism, explicitly divert attention elsewhere (cf. notes on 3:25–26; 4:2; 6:22ff.). The conjunction of water and Spirit in 1:26, 33 is no support for this position, as there the two are contrasted, whereas in 3:5 they are co-ordinated.

(3) A variation on this view is that ‘water’ refers not to Christian baptism but to John’s baptism (Godet, 2. 49–52; Westcott, 1. 108–109, and others). In that case, Jesus is either saying that the baptism of repentance, as important as it is, must not be thought sufficient: there must be Spirit-birth as well; or, if Nicodemus refused to be baptized by the Baptist, Jesus is rebuking him and saying that he must pass through repentance-baptism (‘water’) and new birth (‘Spirit’). ‘To receive the Spirit from the Messiah was no humiliation; on the contrary, it was a glorious privilege. But to go down into Jordan before a wondering crowd and own [his] need of cleansing and new birth was too much. Therefore to this Pharisee our Lord declares that an honest dying to the past is as needful as new life for the future’ (Dods, EGT, 1. 713).

The argument presupposes that John the Baptist was so influential at the time that a mere mention of water would conjure up pictures of his ministry. If so, however, the response of Nicodemus is inappropriate. If the allusion to the Baptist were clear, why should Nicodemus respond with such incredulity, ignorance and unbelief (3:4, 9–10, 12), rather than mere distaste or hardened arrogance? Even if John’s baptism is mentioned in near contexts, the burden of these contexts is to stress the relative unimportance of his rite (1:23, 26; 3:23, 30). 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 shortly to be superseded by Christian baptism? Moreover, as Dods sets out this proposed solution, it is assumed that Jesus is recognized as the Messiah who dispenses the Spirit, but it is far from clear that Nicodemus has progressed so far in his appreciation of Jesus.

(4) Several interpreters have argued that Jesus is arguing against the ritual washings of the Essenes (a conservative and frequently monastic Jewish movement), or perhaps
against Jewish ceremonies in general. What is necessary is Spirit-birth, not mere water-purification. But ‘water’ and ‘Spirit’ are not contrasted in v. 5: they are linked, and together become the equivalent of ‘from above’ (v. 3).

(5) A number of less influential proposals have been advanced. Some have suggested that ‘water’ represents Torah (which can refer to the Pentateuch, or to the entire Jewish teaching and tradition about God, written and oral, or something between the two extremes). But though water is sometimes a symbol for Torah in rabbinic literature, ‘birth of water’ or the like does not occur. Moreover the stress in the Fourth Gospel is on the life-giving qualities of Jesus’ words (6:63); the Scriptures point to him (5:39). Odeberg (p. 50), Morris (pp. 216–218) and others have seen in ‘born of water and the Spirit’ an hendiadys for spiritual seed or semen, in contrast with semen of the flesh (v. 6). The entire expression refers to God’s engendering seed or efflux, cast over against the natural birth Nicodemus mentions in the preceding verse. But Odeberg’s supporting citations are both late and unconvincing, demanding that the reader (not to mention Nicodemus!) make numerous doubtful connections. Jesus’ indignation that Nicodemus had not grasped what he was saying (v. 10) suddenly sounds artificial and forced. Hodges has recently suggested that the two crucial terms, both without articles, should be rendered ‘water and wind’, together symbolizing God’s vivifying work, since Greek pneuma can mean ‘wind’ or ‘breath’ as well as ‘spirit’ (cf. notes on 3:8). But this fails to reckon with the fact that pneuma almost always means ‘spirit’ in the New Testament. Only very powerful contextual clues can compel another rendering: the presence or absence of the article is certainly not an adequate clue (cf. v. 8 where pneuma = ‘wind’ is articular). The word pneuma in the very next verse (v. 6) cannot easily be understood to mean anything other than ‘spirit’, and it is this consistent meaning that prepares the way for the analogical argument of v. 8, where wind symbolizes spirit.

The most plausible interpretation of ‘born of water and the Spirit’ turns on three factors. First, the expression is parallel to ‘from above’ (anōthen, v. 3), and so only one birth is in view. Second, the preposition ‘of’ governs both ‘water’ and ‘spirit’. The most natural way of taking this construction is to see the phrase as a conceptual unity: there is a water-spirit source (cf. Murray J. Harris, NIDNTT 3. 1178) that stands as the origin of this regeneration. Third, Jesus berates Nicodemus for not understanding these things in his role as ‘Israel’s teacher’ (v. 10), a senior ‘professor’ of the Scriptures, and this in turn suggests we must turn to what Christians call the Old Testament to begin to discern what Jesus had in mind.

Although the full construction ‘born of water and of the Spirit’ is not found in the Old Testament, the ingredients are there. At a minor level, the idea that Israel, the covenant community, was properly called ‘God’s son’ (Ex. 4:22; Dt. 32:6; Ho. 11:1) provides at least a little potential background for the notion of God ‘begetting’ people, enough, Brown thinks, that it should have enabled Nicodemus ‘to understand that Jesus was proclaiming the arrival of the eschatological times when men would be God’s children’ (1. 139). Far more important is the Old Testament background to ‘water’ and ‘spirit’. The ‘spirit’ is constantly God’s principle of life, even in creation (e.g. Gn. 2:7; 6:3; Jb. 34:14); but many Old Testament writers look forward to a time when God’s ‘spirit’ will be poured out on humankind (Joel 2:28) with the result that there will be blessing and righteousness (Is. 11:19–20; 36:26–27). When water is used figuratively in the Old Testament, it habitually refers to renewal or cleansing, especially when it is found in conjunction with ‘spirit’. This conjunction may be explicit, or may hide behind language depicting the ‘pouring out’ of the spirit (cf. Nu. 19:17–19; Ps. 51:9–10; Is. 32:15; 44:3; Ezk. 39:29), and inner renewal which cleanses God’s covenant people from their idolatry and disobedience (Ezk. 11:19–20; 36:26–27).
after Ezekiel’s water/spirit passage (cf. Ezk. 37; and notes on 3:8, below). The language is reminiscent of the ‘new heart’ expressions that revolve around the promise of the new covenant (Je. 31:29ff.). Similar themes were sometimes picked up in later Judaism (e.g. Jubilees 1:23–25).

In short, born of water and spirit (the article and the capital ‘S’ in the NIV should be dropped: the focus is on the impartation of God’s nature as ‘spirit’ [cf. 4:24], not on the Holy Spirit as such) signals a new begetting, a new birth that cleanses and renews, the eschatological cleansing and renewal promised by the Old Testament prophets. True, the prophets tended to focus on the corporate results, the restoration of the nation; but they also anticipated a transformation of individual ‘hearts’—no longer hearts of stone but hearts that hunger to do God’s will. It appears that individual regeneration is presupposed. Apparently Nicodemus had not thought of the Old Testament passages this way. If he was like some other Pharisees, he was too confident of the quality of his own obedience to think he needed much repentance (cf. Lk. 7:30), let alone to have his whole life cleansed and his heart transformed, to be born again.

Some have argued that if the flow of the passage is anything like what has been described then it is hopelessly anachronistic, for John’s Gospel makes it abundantly clear (cf. esp. 7:37–39) that the Holy Spirit would not be given until after Jesus is glorified, and it is this Holy Spirit who must effect the new birth, even if the expression ‘born of water and spirit’ does not refer to the Holy Spirit per se. So how then can Jesus demand of Nicodemus such regeneration?

The charge is ill-conceived. Jesus is not presented as demanding that Nicodemus experience the new birth in the instant; rather, he is forcefully articulating what must be experienced if one is to enter the kingdom of God. The resulting tension is no different from the corresponding Synoptic tension as to when the kingdom dawns. In Matthew, for instance, Jesus is born the King (Mt. 1–2), he announces the kingdom and performs the powerful works of the kingdom (4:17; 12:28), but it is not until he has arisen from the dead that all authority becomes his (28:18–20). That is why all discipleship in all four Gospels is inevitably transitional. The coming-to-faith of the first followers of Jesus was in certain respects unique: they could not instantly become ‘Christians’ in the full-orbed sense, and experience the full sweep of the new birth, until after the resurrection and glorification of Jesus. If we take the Gospel records seriously, we must conclude that Jesus sometimes proclaimed truth the full significance and application of which could be fully appreciated and experienced only after he had risen from the dead. John 3 falls under this category.

It appears, then, that the passage makes good sense within the historical framework set out for us, i.e. as a lesson for Nicodemus within the context of the ministry of Jesus. But we must also ask how John expected his readers to understand it. If his targeted readers were hellenistic Jews and Jewish proselytes who had been exposed to Christianity and whom John was trying to evangelize (cf. Introduction, § VI, and notes on 20:30–31), then his primary message for them is clear. No matter how good their Jewish credentials, they too must be born again if they are to see or enter the kingdom of God. When John wrote this, Christian baptism had been practised for several decades (which was of course not the case when Jesus spoke with Nicodemus). If (and it is a quite uncertain ‘if’) the Evangelist expected his readers to detect some secondary allusion to Christian baptism in v. 5 (cf. Richter, Studien, pp. 327–345), the thrust of the passage treats such an allusion quite distantly. What is emphasized is the need for radical transformation, the fulfilment of Old Testament promises anticipating the outpouring of the Spirit, and not a particular rite. If baptism is associated in the readers’ minds with entrance into the Christian faith, and therefore with new birth, then they are being told in the strongest terms that it is the new birth itself that is essential, not the rite.10

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