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” (γεννηθῇ ἐξ 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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² All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the 1977 edition of NASB.

An Examination of Key Concepts

Nicodemus is identified in 3:1 as a Pharisee, a “ruler of the Jews” (ἀρχων 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. 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.” 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.” 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, γενναίος ἡξ, “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. 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.

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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” (εγεννήθησαν), “from God” (έκ

8New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis, s.v. “Adop-
tion,” 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
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 ἀνυγεννήσας in 1 Pet 1:3, 23, παλιγγενεσίας in Tit 3:5, and ἀπεκτάσεων in Jas 1:18.
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).
In 3:3–8, an aorist passive form of \( \gamma \varepsilon \nu \nu \nu \dot{\omega} \), followed by \( \dot{\epsilon} \kappa \) 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,” \( \gamma \varepsilon \nu \nu \nu \dot{\eta} \dot{\eta} \ \dot{\eta} \nu \omega \dot{\theta} \dot{e} \dot{n} \)). Verse 5 closely parallels v. 3. Jesus’ replacement of \( \dot{\alpha} \nu \dot{\omega} \dot{\theta} \dot{e} \dot{n} \) with \( \dot{\epsilon} \zeta \ \dot{u} \dot{d} \dot{a} \dot{t} \dot{o} \zeta \ k \alpha \ \pi \nu \varepsilon \mu \mu \mu \mu \zeta \zeta \zeta \) 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, \( \gamma \varepsilon \nu \nu \nu \dot{\omega} \) is used in a passive form 9 times in 1 John, all of which refer to a birth produced by God, \( \gamma \varepsilon \nu \nu \nu \mu \mu \mu \zeta \zeta \zeta \ \dot{e} \kappa \ \tau \alpha \nu \ \theta \nu \tau \dot{u} \) 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 \( \gamma \varepsilon \nu \nu \nu \dot{\omega} \), 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 \( \gamma \varepsilon \nu \nu \nu \dot{\omega} \) 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.

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 \( \dot{u} \dot{d} \omega \rho \). 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). 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

\[ \text{16Hoekema, } \textit{Saved by Grace}, \text{ p. 97.} \]

\[ \text{17NIDNTT, s.v. “} \dot{u} \dot{d} \omega \rho \text{,” by O. Bocher, 3:989; and NIDOTTE, s.v. “} \dot{\varepsilon} \mu \dot{\gamma} \text{,” by Michael A. Grisanti, 2:930.} \]
of living water” (Jer 2:13; 17:13). 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, and is used as a metaphor 7 times. As a metaphor, “living water” represents life that is produced by the Spirit. In 4:14, the water given by Jesus becomes “a well of water ἵνα ἐφθάσῃ ἀναπαύσεις ἐπὶ τὸν ἀμώμος ἐπὶ τὸν ἔθισμον.” In 6:63, “it is the Spirit [πνεῦμα] who gives life [ζωογόνος].” In 7:38–39, “from his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water [ἐδατος ζωρος]. But this He spoke of the Spirit [πνεῦμα].” 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” 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

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19 For 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).

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


23 The Hebrew term מַעְנָה, “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 מַעְנָה 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). 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, and he generally uses it as reference to the Holy Spirit producing spiritual life.

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 promises and place an emphasis on Israel’s eschatological future. In keeping with this twofold theological emphasis, both Isaiah and Ezekiel use the Old Testament term נַפְשׁ ("breath, spirit, wind") over 50 times. Of the 377 or 378 uses of נַפְשׁ in the Masoretic Text, נַפְשׁ is found in Isaiah 51 times and Ezekiel 52 times. Because of the major emphases of Isaiah and Ezekiel, these are texts with which a Jewish teacher such as Nicodemus should have been acquainted.

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25 The 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.

26 Dunn, Baptism, p. 189.


29 See supra, n. 23.

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” (µyIm'AqX;a) is parallel with “I will pour out My Spirit” (yjiWr qXoa). 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.”

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 j"Wr to develop his message about the life-giving operation of the Spirit. In v. 1 the Spirit (j"Wr) 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” (j"Wr) 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.

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as vv. 11–14 explain.

11 Then 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.’ 12 Therefore 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. 13 Then 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. 14 And I will put My Spirit 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. 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. This eschatological setting conjoins water and spirit in the context of cleansing from sin and a spiritual transformation.

25 Then 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. 26 Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put My Spirit 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 produces a new heart and new spirit 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). Therefore, Ezekiel 36:25–27 provides a

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33 Though נִיהָרָה (‘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.

significant informing text for our interpretation of John 3:5. 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.’” 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).

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

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.”

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

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


38Schnackenburg, John, 1:370.

39Dunn, Baptism, p. 189.
theological emphasis in this passage is greatly assisted by a number of parallel expressions to γεννηθῇ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος. Second, we will examine those syntactical features in v. 5 that have an impact on our study of γεννηθῇ ἐξ 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 ζωῆς).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 ἔιθελεῖν (“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:

γεννηθῇ ἰνωθεν, “born from above” (v. 3)
γεννηθῇ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, “born of water and the Spirit” (v. 5)
τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος πνεῦμα ἐστιν, “that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (v. 6)
γεννηθῇναι ἰνωθεν, “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 πνεῦμα 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 ἰνωθεν in 3:3, 7 is generally translated as “again,”43

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41Carson, John, p. 191.
43The adverb ἰνωθεν is translated as “again” in the KJV, NASB, NIV, and NKJV.
it may also be translated as “from above.” Either translation is lexically possible, and there is also a possibility that ἀνωθεν is a double entendre. As such, ἀνωθεν can be taken in three ways. First, some have taken ἀνωθεν as having a double meaning. Support for this has been drawn from Johannine style. Though this understanding is perhaps possible, it misses the force of Jesus’ argument in vv. 5–8. Second, others have taken ἀνωθεν 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. 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 ἀνωθεν in a spatial sense, “from above.” With this understanding Jesus informs Nicodemus that he must have a heavenly birth. This understanding is supported from the only three other uses of ἀνωθεν in John, 3:31; 19:11, 23. In each case, ἀνωθεν means “from above.”

If we take ἀνωθεν in the third sense, this is another way of clearly indicating that one must be born of God. As such, γεννηθην ἀνωθεν 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

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

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


51 Hoekema, Saved by Grace, p. 97.
kingdom of God, he must be born of the Spirit. Thus, it is this third use of *ἀνωθεν* 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 εξ ὑδάτως και πνεύματος, therefore, which replaces *ἀνωθεν* 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.”

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 *πνεῦματος*, that are coordinated by *καί*. This indicates that Jesus regards *ὕδατος καὶ πνεῦματος* as a conceptual unity. If *ὕδατος καὶ πνεῦματος* is a conceptual unity, this phrase may be taken either as a “water-spirit” source or a “water-and-Spirit” source of birth. 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.” The origin of regeneration is a *ὕδωρ* and *πνεῦμα* source.

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*.” 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. In addition, this use of *πνεῦμα* could be suggested by the nature of the prepositional phrase in v. 5. The preposition *ἐκ* governing

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54 Dunn, *Baptism*, p. 192.
56 Carson, 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).
57 Carson, John, p. 194.
the two nouns, ὕδωρ and πνεῦμα, coordinated by καὶ naturally suggests that this phrase is a conceptual unity: a “water-spirit” birth. 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 καὶ. 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.

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; 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.” 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 πνεῦματος) 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, 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 πῦρι).” As in John 3:5, we have a preposition ἐν governing two anarthrous nouns, πνεῦμα and πῦρ. The baptism that would be performed by

59Carson, John, p. 194.
60Belleville, “Born of Water and Spirit,” p. 140.
Jesus is accomplished by two means: the Holy Spirit and fire, with the preposition ἐν embracing both of these elements. Therefore, we have a “Spirit-and-fire” baptism. Though πνεῦμα, in John 3:5, is not qualified by the adjective ἁγιος, 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. 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.

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. 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, the Spirit 2 times, and the flesh once. 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

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64 In 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.


67 This 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.

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

70 John 3:6, 8.

71 John 3:6; this use of σαρκις 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 \( \pi\nu\varepsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha \). However, my point is not to set up an absolute dichotomy between the person of \( \pi\nu\varepsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha \) and the nature imparted as \( \pi\nu\varepsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha \). 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 \( \pi\nu\varepsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha \) 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 [שֶׁמֶר בְּלִי] and put [יְרוּשָׁלַיִם] a new spirit [נְתַן חַיִּים] within you [בְּלִי רְאוֹרָּה]” is tantamount to “I will put [יְרוּשָׁלַיִם] My Spirit [נְתַן חַיִּים] within you [בְּלִי רְאוֹרָּה].” The parallelism in these two verses suggests an inseparable connection between “new heart,” “new spirit,” and Yahweh’s “Spirit.” Therefore, to be born of \( \pi\nu\varepsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha\topos \) 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, ὁ ὅρα, and \( \pi\nu\varepsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha \) 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


\(^{73}\)For 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 ὑδατός καὶ πνεῦματος 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.”

Though some who take “water” as Christian baptism see Jesus’ use of ὑδατός as a reference either to His own baptizing ministry (so Dodd) or to John’s (so Lenski), they are united by maintaining that both Jesus’ baptizing ministry and John’s are part of the one sacrament of Christian baptism. Others of a Christian baptism persuasion do not view ὑδατός 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 ὑδατός καὶ. On the other hand, Bernard maintains that John himself added this to Jesus’ words as an interpretation for the following generation. Whether

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75Ibid., pp. 310–11.


"Born of Water and the Spirit" in John 3:5

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.”

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 πνεῦματος as a reference to the gift of the Spirit that accompanies Christian baptism. Sanders and Mastin state that John believed that baptism conveyed “the gift of the spirit, as the occasion of the new birth.” 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.”

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

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81 Dodd, *Interpretation*, p. 311.


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.”

John’s Baptism and the New Birth

A variation of the Christian baptism position is one that takes ἐξ ὀσπὸς 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 ὀσπὸς, he would have naturally thought of John’s baptism, for John’s baptism was currently creating an immense reaction in Israel. 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 ὀσπὸς is an outward symbol of an inward repentance.

Those maintaining this view of ὀσπὸς interpret the connection between ὀσπὸς and πνεῦμα in two different ways. First, some see ὀσπὸς, a baptism of repentance, and πνεῦμα, the new birth, as coordinate requirements to enter into the kingdom of God. With this understanding, ὀσπὸς 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. 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.

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87Westcott, John, pp. 49–50.
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 ὑδόρ 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 ὑδάτος] 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 ὑδόρ 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 ὑδόρ.93

Natural Birth and the New Birth

This view argues that ὑδάτος καὶ πνεῦματος refer to both a

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 ὑδόρ is taken to be a reference to the Torah, see the citations in Belleville, “Born of Water and Spirit,” p. 130.
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 ὑδατός 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 ὑδατός 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” (ἐκ ὑδάτων). 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


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 ὑδάτως καὶ πνεῦμα 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.”

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. Support for interpreting πνεῦμα as “wind” is found in 3:8 where πνεῦμα is used twice, translated respectively as “wind” and “spirit.”

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 πνεύμα (“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.” Consequently, Hodges interpretation of πνεῦμα in 3:5 as “wind” is improbable.

Purification and the New Birth

This position interprets ὑδάτως καὶ πνεῦμα 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. The terms “water” and “spirit” are used in Ezekiel 36:25–27 to stress the Spirit’s future purification of His nation. Though the Old Testament

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100 Ibid., pp. 217–18.
101 Ibid., p. 216.
102 Carson, John, pp. 193–94.
104 Bruce, 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.\textsuperscript{105} Jesus’ dropping of the concept of water and, consequently, emphasizing only the Spirit’s work in vv. 6–15 further supports this view.\textsuperscript{106}

While advocates of this position agree that \textit{\textupsilon\delta\omicron\omicron\omicron\rho} is used figuratively for the Spirit’s work in cleansing and renewal, the interpretation of \textit{\pi\nu\epsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha} can be taken either as a reference to the implanting of God’s nature as spirit,\textsuperscript{107} or to the Spirit.\textsuperscript{108} Though these are two viable interpretations of \textit{\pi\nu\epsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha}, the evidence suggests that it is preferable to interpret \textit{\pi\nu\epsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha} 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 \textit{\gamma\epsilon\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\omega}, \textit{\textupsilon\delta\omicron\omicron\omicron\rho}, and \textit{\pi\nu\epsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha}. 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

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\textsuperscript{105}Carson, \textit{John}, p. 195.


\textsuperscript{108}A few supporters are Murray (\textit{Redemption}, pp. 96–104), Hoekema (\textit{Saved by Grace}, pp. 96–98), and Ladd (\textit{Theology}, p. 284).
new life in Christ, a change which removes the contradiction of sin and fits for the fellowship of God’s son.\footnote{Murray, Redemption, p. 100.}

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