

Born From Above – a solution to the mystery of the New Birth (part 4)

If there is a connection between John 3 (about the New Birth into the Kingdom) and Acts 2 (the beginning of the Kingdom), we should be able to show it. It is possible to establish some clear parallels between the two chapters, as they are listed in the following table:

| John 3 | Message | Acts 2 | Message |
|--|---|---|--|
| <i>Verse 3: "No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above."</i> | The New Birth starts with "understanding" what the Kingdom is. | <i>Verse 35-36: "Sit at my right hand!....God has made him both Lord and Messiah."</i> | The Kingdom has been established when Jesus took His throne in heaven. Jesus is King! |
| <i>Verse 5: "No one can enter the Kingdom without being born of water and Spirit."</i> | To enter the Kingdom one needs to be born of "water and Spirit". | <i>Verse 38: "...be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ, and you will receive the gift of the Spirit."</i> | Through water-baptism the Spirit will be received. |
| <i>Verse 13: "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man (who is in heaven)."</i> | Jesus is the one who will ascend to heaven. (And John testifies that He is in heaven now – the first witness). | <i>Verse 34: "For David did not ascend into the heavens but he says: "The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand....!"."</i> | Jesus is the one who has ascended to heaven (Peter testifies – the second witness) |
| <i>Verse 14,15: "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him, may have eternal life."</i> | Jesus must be lifted up, first on the cross, but then as King in Heaven, so that whoever believes in Him, may receive eternal (spiritual) life. | <i>Verse 32-33: "This Jesus God raised up, and that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this..."</i> | Jesus has been raised up and lifted up (as King in heaven), and He has poured out the Holy Spirit, so that eternal, spiritual life now is possible for whoever believes. |

We proceed now by going through Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus verse by verse.

1. "Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person." 3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

When Nicodemus asked Jesus about him *coming from God*, it is very possible, that he expressed an expectation of the Kingdom of God. As a Pahrisee, he knew the scriptures, and the Jewish people were expecting a Messiah figure, who would restore the Davidic Kingdom to the Jews. What they were thinking of was a political figure, who also would free the Jewish people from their enemies (the Romans). But this figure would of course be sent by God, as the prophets, that speak of that king were inspired by God. So when Nicodemus asks Jesus about his origin, he probably is trying to find out if Christ is that king. That would at least explain why Jesus starts talking about the Kingdom of God here.

Now the question about this first statement of Jesus, that *one must be born from to see the Kingdom of God*, is whether "seeing" the Kingdom of God is the same as "entering the Kingdom of God" (as in verse 5). If the answer is "yes", then the statements in verse 2 and 5 must be taking as roughly expressing the same thing.

It is reasonable however to see them as two separate statements: to "see the Kingdom" means "to understand the reality of the Kingdom", "to know the Kingdom is there". Taken that way, Jesus is saying, that the Holy Spirit *must enlighten the hearts of men* to understand the Kingdom, that the New Birth starts with the Spirit *revealing the truth of the Kingdom*. If it is taken that way, we can draw a parallel to Acts 2, where Peter, after the outpouring of the Spirit, opens the eyes of the Jews by telling them about the fact that the Kingdom has been established in Heaven, when Jesus took his throne there.

That would also explain, why Jesus phrases it as "*born from above*". What comes from above, what comes from heaven, is always the "*spiritual*". And in this case, talking about a human being "*born from above*", it starts with *knowledge* of spiritual reality, revealed in the *mind* of a person. The spiritual birth starts with the *head*, with *knowledge*, with *believing* revealed truth. The symbolism of the New Birth as *a birth from above* will be elaborated on in the chapter "*Cosmic Symbolism of the New Birth*".

4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

How to interpret Jesus words here? What does it mean that one needs to be born of *water and Spirit*? Traditionally, in Eastern Orthodoxy and Catholicism, the "*water*" always has been interpreted as being about baptism. And thus, Jesus is talking about baptismal regeneration here.

However, as many Protestants have reasoned for, it could also be, that “water” her refers to a natural birth. One must be naturally born and thereafter spiritually born to enter the Kingdom of God. What can be said about that argument? In some ways, it could be perceived as a little superfluous to say that. *Every* human being is born naturally, regardless if they ever will be born spiritually, so what is the point of adding that to a statement about a spiritual birth?

The context of John 3 actually is about baptism. Verses 22-26 speak about Jesus and the disciples baptizing, and then also of John the Baptist and his baptism. The Jews already knew about ceremonial washing (verse 25). The baptism of John the Baptist was already seen as a baptism which would mark repentance and a new beginning for anyone who chose to be baptized. Therefore it is reasonable to stick to an interpretation of the “water” being the water of baptism. The spiritual birth involves water-baptism, and we have already seen that baptismal regeneration is supported by other parts of scripture.

6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’

The one thing Jesus makes clear here, is that the spiritual birth creates something spiritual in the person receiving it. As a human being (an infant) born of flesh, is “flesh”, so that which is born of spirit, is spirit. The new life is *spiritual* life.

8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

There is a couple of interpretations of this verse possible. One explanation could be that the influence of the Holy Spirit is *invisible* like the wind. The wind is invisible, you cannot see where it comes from, but it can be heard. The spiritual birth is also invisible, but its effect can be seen in the behaviour of the one being born again.

Another interpretation is that Jesus wants to point forward to what happened at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came, and what could be heard was *the sound of a violent wind*. If so, Jesus himself connects his teaching of the spiritual birth with the events of the first Pentecost. These two interpretations are not mutually exclusive: they could both be true.

9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10 Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

The fact that Jesus kind of rebukes Nicodemus here could be an indication, that the spiritual birth is connected to baptism. As we have discussed, the baptism of John the Baptist was already known to everybody and the Jews knew a form of ceremonial washing. If baptism plays a part in regeneration, then the rebuke of Nicodemus makes sense.

11 “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

Talking about being born from above (heaven) surely is a heavenly thing. And Jesus is concerned about whether people would believe in Him, when talking about heavenly things.

¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, (who is in Heaven).

This is an interesting statement. Jesus is speaking about ascending into heaven as if it already happened. Are we to understand that Jesus means that literally, that it already happened? It is difficult to make sense of that. It is more likely that Jesus actually is talking about the future, his ascension to Heaven. That would happen between the events of Jesus' resurrection and Pentecost. By using the perfect tense Jesus is just trying to stress that this ascension is something fixed in the future which really is going to happen. Consider this example: if I before a chess tournament, would say this: "*No one has ever won this tournament with a 100% score, except Micha Pudlo.*" I might just try to express that I am pretty sure that I am going to win this tournament with a 100% score.

What is interesting though is the part in parentheses "*who is in Heaven*". This addition is being present in some, but not all, known copies of the gospel of John. If this part of the sentence still is being uttered by Jesus, that would be problematic, as Jesus would be declaring himself to be in Heaven while He is having his conversation with Nicodemus, which he clearly not was. It is most likely that John added this part of the sentence for some reason. It could be an addition of John to explain Jesus' statement. Maybe because of the fact that Jesus had used the perfect tense when talking about his ascension to Heaven, John adds "*who is in Heaven*"; he is trying to say, this *ascension*, of which Jesus was speaking, *has now happened*, because Jesus is in Heaven now (when John is writing).

Now we are going to the next two verses:

¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

The lifting up of Jesus is something that is articulated at other places in the gospel of John. In John 12, 32, Jesus says:

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."

John immediately explains what is meant here in verse 33:

"He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die."

Jesus died, being lifted up on a cross. Jesus somehow knew beforehand how he was going to die, and articulates that in John 12. In John 8, Jesus also mentions being lifted up:

"When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he."

Here, Jesus is talking to a group of unbelieving Jews, claiming that He and His message come from God. And He declares that the Jews, who at that very moment do not acknowledge that

fact, one day will understand it, when *they have lifted up* the Son of Man. That is, after his crucifixion, after Jesus' death on the cross, the Jews will understand that He is the Son of God.

Now here in John 3,14, Jesus refers to an Old Testament story: the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness. When the Israelites were rebelling in unbelief against God and against Moses, God punished them with a plague of deadly snakes. Many were bitten and dying, when God came to their rescue: Moses was told to erect a pole with a copper snake on it, and every Israelite, who looked at that snake, would be healed from the snakebites they suffered. So what we see here, is, that Jesus is comparing that event from the old days with His own crucifixion. Every human being, who *looks at Jesus and believes in Him*, will be saved from being dead in sins and receive eternal life from God.

Now it may seem at first glance that verse 14 and 15 have nothing to do with Jesus *ascending to heaven* in verse 13. But let us take a closer look at the crucifixion of Jesus. When Jesus was crucified, Pontius Pilate made a sign with the letters "INRI"; those were Latin letters: "Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudeorum, meaning: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews". When Pilate did so, some of the Jews wanted to change that into: "Jesus of Nazareth, who said he is the King of the Jews." Pilate though did not listen to them. What Pilate unwittingly did at Jesus' crucifixion, is *declaring Jesus King*. Earlier Pilate had conversed with Jesus about his Kingship. Jesus declared that He had a kingdom, which was "not from here". When Pilate asked: "So you are a king?" Jesus replied:

"You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify of the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth, listens to my voice."

Jesus declares himself to have come into the world was to testify of the truth. Which truth? The truth of God as the King of Heaven. And every person who belongs to the truth, listens to Jesus' voice, that is: *obeys Him as King*. And so, every person, who obeys Jesus, will be a member of that Kingdom of Heaven, which He came to proclaim.

So when Jesus was crucified, and the plate that was put up, declaring Him as king of the Jews, Pilate unwittingly proclaimed Jesus as the King of His own Kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven. That would become a reality later, when after the resurrection and ascension, Jesus sat down on His throne in Heaven, but certainly it was already prophesied by a Roman pagan at Jesus' crucifixion. The lifting up of Jesus on the cross therefore also is *the lifting up* of Jesus as the King of Heaven, and that is how verse 13 of John 3 relates to verses 14 and 15.

Now, this might be the end of Jesus conversation with Nicodemus. Because there is some dispute between Bible scholars about the following verses, 16 to 21. Some hold they are still part of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus – others do not. There is a few good reasons to think they are not. Let us first read the verses:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of

God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

One of the reasons to assume that this is not anymore part of Jesus' talk with Nicodemus, is that Jesus almost always speaks about God as "my Father" or "my Father in heaven". Here in verse 16 to 21 God the father is referenced three times to at just "God". Another thing is, that it seems that John is picking up a general theme from his gospel: *the light coming into the darkness*. The gospel of John starts exactly with that (John 1:4-10), and Jesus as the light is a recurring theme (5:33-35, 8:12, 9:5, 12:36) in the rest of the gospel. It seems therefore reasonable that it is John who added this, as a kind of commentary to what Jesus said to Nicodemus.

Assuming that it is John talking now - what is John trying to tell us about the New Birth - why does he add these verses? Firstly, he emphasizes what Jesus said about eternal life - that it will come through faith - believing in Jesus. *Faith in Jesus will lead to eternal life*. God sent His son so that we might not be condemned and perish, but be saved and have eternal life. And the way to eternal life is by believing.

Now John 3,16 one of the arguments for the (Protestant) notion that salvation and regeneration comes only through believing in Jesus. They kind of close the conversation with John 3,16. You want eternal life? - you wanna be saved? - Just believe in Jesus and it is done. Now that is certainly possible - and in the narrow sense of "regeneration" it is certainly true, as we have seen in Part 3. *Those that believe in Jesus have eternal life - they will not be condemned*.

But there is more to it than first meets the eye. Firstly, we have already discussed how "*waterbaptism*" fits best with the notion of "*being born of water and spirit*". Secondly, it might be, that John is expressing in verses 16-21 that there is more to becoming born again, namely *doing what is true*.

For John closes with this statement: "*those who do what is true, come to the light.*" *Coming to the light* is a metaphor of *being born*. In the natural world, when a baby is born, it goes from darkness into light, when it leaves the womb and enters into the natural world outside. What John is trying to express here is, that the spiritual birth also involves going from darkness to light. Here we should understand "*darkness*" and "*light*" as *spiritual* darkness (ignorance and lies) and *spiritual* light (understanding and truth). Spiritual birth involves going from ignorance and believing a lie to understanding and knowing the truth. And what is needed to be born of the Spirit, is that people who *see* and *understand* the truth Jesus is bringing, also *act on it* - they need *to do the truth* - to make the transition from spiritual death to spiritual life. And what is it exactly, that they need to do?

John does not tell us that. This is the end of the section. Because the mystery of the New Birth was to be postponed - until the day of Pentecost - when Peter, using the keys to open up the Kingdom - tells his hearers that they need to repent, be baptized, and then they would receive

the gift of the Spirit – then they would be fully born of the Spirit – they would have entered the Kingdom.

But in the closing verse of the same chapter 3, we get another hint from John. In support that more is needed than just *believing*, John writes this in verse 36:

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life but must endure God’s wrath.”

Here John clearly means to say, that *believing* the Son should also lead to *obeying* the Son. For, according to this verse, if someone believes the Son, but at the same time disobeys the Son, he would have eternal life (because of believing) and at the same time will not see life (because of disobeying): that is a flat contradiction. And therefore: obedience *must flow* from faith, *doing* the truth must follow *believing* the truth. The following table summarizes this:

| | Obey the Son | Disobey the Son |
|--------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Believe the Son | “Has Eternal life” | “Has Eternal life” and “Will not see life” (which is contradictory, and therefore “believing and disobeying” is not possible) |
| Disbelieve the Son | Not mentioned | “Will not see life” |

Some translations have tried to evade a possible contradiction in this way:

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disbelieves the Son will not see life but must endure God’s wrath.”

But surely, if John wished to express this, then he would have used the same Greek verb for “*believe*” (pisteuoo), in both parts of the sentence. But John does use another verb for “*obey*” (apeithoo), and therefore it is most reasonable to translate the two verbs differently.

Translating the verse two times with “*believe*”, reveals a Protestant presupposition (that faith *alone* is necessary for salvation).

If we translate the Greek word more straightforwardly, we can see, how John tries to support verse 21 (“*doing the truth*”), with verse 36 (“*obeying the Son*”). To be born again, one needs to obey God. How exactly? What does one need to do to be born again? That is what (in my opinion) is not part of Jesus’ teaching. Jesus left the keys of the Kingdom to Peter – Peter was allowed to finish Jesus’ teaching about the New Birth – the Birth into the spiritual Kingdom of God.

What Peter will explain in Acts 2, is, that, to be born again, one needs to repent and one needs to be baptized in water. *Then* gift of the Holy Spirit will be given to the one believing. Then the New Birth will be complete.

Our following chapter will be Acts 2. As is the contention of this book, the Keys of the Kingdom were given to Peter for three tasks:

1. Opening up the understanding of the Jews to the Kingdom being established in Heaven and expanding to Earth.
2. Explaining how one could enter the Kingdom (i.e. explaining how to be born again).
3. Helping believers enter the Kingdom (being born again) by baptizing them.