

# The water in John 3:5

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John 3:5 refers to water. This term, within the Nicodemus discourse, is interpreted in many ways. From as far back as the early church and the Church Fathers, most of them have indicated that when Jesus talked about water, he was referring to baptism. This point of view elevated baptism to the level of a conversion, being a precondition for entering the kingdom of God, causing the early church to make baptism a sacrament. After cursorily discussing some viewpoints on the use of the term 'water' in John 3:5, this article examines the structure of John 3:3, 5–7. This brings the article to the conclusion that the water in John 3:5 could be a reference to the amniotic fluid that surrounds the baby in the womb and is present at birth. In the light of this, two conditions are put forward in order to see and enter the kingdom of God: one must first be born of the flesh, whereupon one must also be born of the Spirit.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** John 3:5 refers to water. Most scholars, with reference to the Church Fathers, have the conviction that it refers to baptism. According to the structure of John 3:3, 5–7, this article argues that the water refers to the amniotic fluid present at a natural birth.

**Keywords:** water; John 3:3; John 3:5; John 3:6; John 3:7; baptism; born of the flesh; born of the Spirit.

## Introduction

The Gospel of John – the *gospel without parables* – uses the term 'water' (ὕδωρ) quite extensively – as much as the three synoptics together. The first four chapters of the gospel contain the most mentions of the term, comprising more than half of the occurrences in the gospel. In John 1, the term 'water' is connected to baptism (Jn 1:26, 31, 33), while John 2 narrates the story about the wedding in Cana, where the water used for ceremonial washing is miraculously turned into the purest, 'best' wine. In John 3:5, the author also uses the term 'water',<sup>1</sup> and in John 3:23, it is once more used in connection with baptism. John 4 depicts the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, where Jesus contrasts the water of Jacob's well to his 'living water'. John 4:46 is again a reference to Cana, where Jesus turned the water into wine.

As all these references to water are quite clear and used in contexts that 'make sense' to the reader, John 3:5 is still a bone of contention for some scholars, because the gospel does not clearly indicate as to what exactly Jesus was referring to here. This most probably was the reason for Reid (1904:313) to state that the term 'water' makes John 3:5 a 'dark saying'. Fowler and Strickland (1974:104) refer to it as '[o]ne of the best known problems in the Gospel of John'. This could be the reason why there are not many scholars currently writing articles or books about this theme. This article is an attempt to bring more clarity to this subject. However, obviously the last word has not yet been spoken.

The pericope in which John 3:5 is set stretches from John 3:1–21 and narrates the so-called Nicodemus discourse to the reader. One could even include the last part of John 2 (Jn 2:23–25) to this pericope as it acts as background and space for the Nicodemus discourse (Michaels 2010:n.p.). However, in this article, only John 3:3 and 3:5–7 will be discussed. In the following sections, different explanations for John 3:5 will be conveyed, with much overlapping between the sections, before discussing the structure of this passage and its outcome.

## 'The water refers to God's grace'

According to this point of view, and read together with Ezekiel 36:25 and John 4:14, 'water' in John 3:5 should be understood in a figurative and metaphorical sense as a reference to the grace

1. Bultmann (1971:138–139) considered this term to be a scribal gloss that was added to the passage of John 3 in order to link it with baptism. However, in light of the structure, as will be discussed later, it seems not to be the case, as 'water' forms an integral part thereof.

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of God (cf. Biblestudytools n.d.; Knowing Jesus n.d.). Regeneration is only possible by the grace of God, giving his people a lively hope and making them new creatures. Regeneration can be ascribed to the Father (1 Pt 1:3; Ja 1:18), the Son (1 Jn 2:29) and the Holy Spirit (Tt 3:5).

In light of John 4:10 and 7:38–39, John 3:5 should therefore refer to the process of regeneration by the Holy Spirit, with reference to the use of ‘living water’, as the ‘water’ in John 3:5 could be a reference to that living water. Justin Martyr, in his *First Apology*, chapter 61, with the heading ‘Christian baptism’, refers to the water as follows: ‘Then they are brought by us where there is water and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated’ (ed. Schaff 1885a:489); he also links it to Isaiah 1:16–20. This point of view – that the water is referred to in a symbolic sense – is theologically sound, especially when linked to John 4 and 7. However, was it Jesus’ intension to use ‘water’ in a symbolic sense here?

## ‘The water refers to being born again (by the word of God)’

This point of view takes Ephesians 5:25–26 as a basis: ‘Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by washing with the water through the word’. Carson (2019) referred to the parallel structure of John 3:3 and 3:5 (Table 1).

In this context, ‘born again’ is expanded to ‘born of water and Spirit’, and therefore, according to Carson (2019), the latter does not refer to two separate births, but to one (Carson 2019). Fowler and Strickland (1974) agreed and based their argument on a ‘grammatical consideration’, pointing out that the two nouns – ‘water’ and ‘Spirit’:

[A]re linked by a conjunction and preceded by a single preposition, ἐκ. This would tend to suggest a single birth with two aspects (or a blend of two ideas) rather than two separate births.<sup>2</sup> (p. 105)

According to Carson (2019), this indicated a new beginning for the new converts. Carson also refers to Ezekiel 36:25–27, insisting that this was a prophecy ‘six centuries before Jesus brought [about] a transformative new beginning, characterised by spectacular cleansing symbolised by water that washes away all impurities’ (Carson 2019; cf. Michaels 2010:n.p.). The Holy Spirit is the gift of God who transforms

**TABLE 1:** Carson’s structure of John 3:3 and 3:5.

John 3:3	John 3:5
Jesus replied: ‘Very truly I tell you,	Jesus answered, ‘Very truly I tell you,
No one can see the kingdom of God	No one can <i>enter</i> the kingdom of God
Unless they are <b>born again</b> ’.	Unless they are <b>born of water and the Spirit</b> ’.

2. Calvin (1949), in his *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, vol. 1 (p. 111) concurred with this as he claims that the two terms ‘water’ and ‘Spirit’ refer to the same thing, just as ‘Spirit and fire’ refer to the same thing in the preaching of John the Baptist (cf. Mt 3:11). However, Witherington (1989:159) argued that there is ‘a similar construction in 1 John 5:6 where ... the reference is to two distinct things’.

the hearts of God’s people – the new Israel. Connecting to this new beginning or era, to which Carson refers, some Church Fathers, being convinced that this passage is all about baptism, argue that it introduces a new era for the baptised. In his *Three Testimonies against the Jews* 1.12, under the heading, ‘That the old baptism should cease and a new one should begin’, Cyprian refers to Isaiah 43:18–21, depicting a situation where the people of God will enter a new era with him, having enough water to drink. He then takes his argument to the New Testament, specifically Matthew 3:11, where the Baptist refers to Jesus who will baptise his people with the Holy Spirit and with fire (ed. Schaff 1885c:1177). This is followed by John 3:5–6, with the implication being that it also refers to the necessity of baptism for someone to enter the kingdom of God. He explicates this in the *Three Testimonies against the Jews* 3.25, with the heading ‘That unless a man has been baptised and born again, he cannot attain unto the kingdom of God’ (ed. Schaff 1885c:1276), where he links this to John 6:53 where Jesus says: ‘Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you’.

Athanasius, in his treatise *On the Incarnation of the Word*, paragraph 14, refers to being born again (Jn 3:5) as ‘the soul born and created anew in the likeness of God’s image’ (ed. Schaff 1885l:278). In his *Lecture 17, Continuation of the Discourse on the Holy Ghost (1 Cor 10:8)*, Cyril of Jerusalem discusses the Holy Spirit, referring to him as the ‘dove of Noe’, who symbolised the ‘beginning of a new generation’ for Noah and his close family (ed. Schaff 1885n:340). Just as the dove descended on Noah, the Holy Spirit descended upon the true Noah (Jesus) who is the author of the second birth depicted by the baptism, with reference to John 3:5 (ed. Schaff 1885n:341). This is the ultimate way in which the Father can give his Holy Spirit to his people (cf. Lk 11:13). It is definitely true that this passage is about being born again, but the fact that there is, according to Carson, only one birth under discussion, does not accord with the structure of this passage, as will be indicated in the next section.

## ‘The water refers to being born of the Spirit’

Closely related to the previous section, McCabe (1999:94–96) basically refers to the same pattern as Carson (2019). He indicates that the Gospel of John has the tendency for parallel expressions that include minor variations (McCabe 1999:94). McCabe cites Snodgrass (1991:16–17), who avers that ‘variation of expression is not intended to convey different ideas, but is typical of the style of the Fourth Gospel’. In this passage, Jesus refers to the new birth five times, each time with a variation (i.e. ‘born from above’, ‘born of water and Spirit’, ‘that which is born of the Spirit is spirit’, ‘be born from above’ and ‘born of the Spirit’, each time referring to only one event: ‘A birth produced by the

Spirit' (McCabe 1999:94), that is, a 'heavenly birth' (McCabe 1999:95). Michaels (2010:n.p.) claims that 'born of water and Spirit' could refer to two actions, namely water baptism and baptism in the Spirit (viewed together or separately).

McCabe (1999:95) indicates that ἄνωθεν can be translated with both 'from above' and 'again', making it possible that the term is used here as a 'double entendre',<sup>3</sup> like the term κατέλαβεν in John 1:5 that can be translated with both 'overcome' and 'understand'. Interestingly, in his *Homily 10 on Romans 5:12*, as part of *The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom on Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, Augustine refers to John 3:3, indicating that we 'were also born again from above', in fact translating ἄνωθεν twice in this passage – with both 'again' and 'from above' (ed. Schaff 1885j:725).<sup>4</sup> However, McCabe chooses 'from above' and builds his argument on the fact that in the other three cases where ἄνωθεν is used in John (Jn 3:31, 19:11, 23), it can be translated with 'from above' (cf. Hodges 1978:213; McCabe 1999:96). Michaels (2010:n.p.) indicated that 'born from above' shows that the 'children' are not born of bloodlines or the desire of man but born of God (Jn 1:13) – a divine birth or reformation. He adds that, in John 1:32–33, the author indicated that the Spirit came down from above, whilst it is also obvious that water comes from above, like rain. Michaels (2010:n.p.) also understands John 4:11 as that Jesus 'meant' ('unstated') that his 'living water' comes 'from above' (Jn 4:11). This also correlates with the quote of Cyril of Jerusalem given under the previous section.

For Michaels (2010:n.p.), both 'water' and 'Spirit' mean 'life' in John's gospel, indicating the commencing of a new life 'from above', that is the eternal life. Being born of water and Spirit, therefore, is just the author's way of referring to the kingdom of God – that is, to eternal life. In line with Kim (who will be discussed later), Michaels (2010:n.p.) suggested that water could also refer here to baptism, but then the reader must 'think more broadly about "water and Spirit" than simply the act of water baptism'.

## 'The water refers to the act of cleansing'

Guzik (2018) postulated that, in line with the prophecy in Ezekiel 36:25–28, the term 'water' in John 3:5 refers to the act of washing and cleansing, becoming part of the New Covenant. Foster (2017:353) adds that this cleansing is not of bodily dirt but of impurity, in combination with the Spirit that transforms the heart.<sup>5</sup> The phrase γεννηθῆναι ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος ('born of water and [the] Spirit') therefore depicts a single action that can be translated as 'being born of God' (cf. Jn 1:13). In imitation of Belleville (1980:138), Foster (2017:353) argued that this therefore does 'not refer to a ritualistic understanding or a physiological interpretation', but to a

3.This refers to a phrase or even a word that can be interpreted in two equal ways.

4.This was done within the context of baptism ('rose again with the old man buried'), with reference to Rm 9:9 (God's promise to Sarah that she would have a son). As it was God's 'promise that begat the son [all of us are] gendered by the words of God' (Schaff 1885k:826), which are also 'not of nature, but of the promise of God', quoting (unrightfully?) John 3:3 (also Eph 5:26, Ja 1:18, and 1 Pt 3:21).

5.The act of cleansing is further discussed under the next section.

single action. Here the implication is that ἄνωθεν should be translated with 'from above' (cf. also Hodges 1978:217; McCabe 1999:88). On the point of a 'single action', Foster is very close to Carson (mentioned here), which implies that he is then also being criticised by this article in light of the structure of the passage.

## 'The water refers to baptism'

This is a ritualistic view of John 3:5, describing the baptism by John the Baptist (Jn 1:26, 33; and 3:23) and the baptism of proselytes and followers of God (Beasley-Murray 2002:36; Dodd 1953:309) as alluding to Ezekiel 36:25–27, which also depicts, according to some scholars, a ritualistic cleansing (cf. Brown 1966:141). Schweizer (1970:177) argued that this passage exhibits the tradition of the Jews to baptise people, as the phrase 'to be born again' in John 3:3 was connected to the rite of baptism (Groenewald 2006:196). In the light of Mark 10:15, this is a childlike acceptance of God's kingdom, which can be interpreted with reference to the early church's understanding of the baptism as being 'born from water and Spirit'.

According to Schweizer (1970:177), in 'the pre-Johannine church, baptism (understood as a rebirth by water and Spirit) guaranteed entry into the coming kingdom of God'. However, John reinterprets it, not working with a 'coming kingdom' anymore, but with a 'present reality', and applying it to the baptism as an ecclesiastical rite. By receiving the baptism, the receiver is 'transported into the coming kingdom' (Groenewald 2006:201). However, according to Guzik (2018), 'there is no real Old Testament (OT) foundation' for baptism in this passage. Furthermore, should this verse refer to baptism, it means that baptism becomes a condition for entering God's kingdom, which is seemingly annihilated by John 3:15–16.

However, this is the direction in which most of the Church Fathers thought. This thought pattern is still found *inter alia* in the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) of today: 'Baptism, the gateway to the sacraments and *necessary for salvation* by actual reception or at least by desire, is validly conferred only by a washing of true water with the proper form of words. *Through baptism men and women are freed from sin, are reborn as children of God*' (Code of Canon Law n.d.; emphasis added). The RCC (n.d.) elaborates on it:

[T]hrough Baptism, God enables us to participate in his life in Jesus Christ and makes us his children. It is *through this sacrament that we receive the Holy Spirit* and become members of the People of God, of the Body of Christ, which is the Church. Baptism becomes our commitment to grow in this new life and to strive to acquire spiritual maturity. By baptism, God purifies us from sin ... Baptism is the sacrament of faith which has the Risen Christ as its source, and *it is the offer of salvation* for all people. (n.p.; emphasis added)

According to these arguments, baptism is a condition for salvation because it frees one from sins and causes one to become a reborn child of God. In this context, baptism equals a conversion. These arguments are connected to John 3:3–6

and are based on numerous citations from the Church Fathers. A few selected arguments of anti-Nicene, Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers will be discussed here – all of them, in their own way, utilising John 3:5 within the context of baptism.

According to some Church Fathers, baptism ‘pleases’ God. The *Pseudo-Clementine Literature* 6.9 (‘Use of Baptism’) discusses the contribution of the baptism of water to the worship of God. After stating that baptism pleases God, it argues, with reference to John 3:5, that being:

[R]egenerated and born again of water and of God, the frailty of your former birth, which you have through men, is cut off, and so at length you shall be able to attain salvation; but otherwise it is impossible. (ed. Schaff 1885d:434)

This is a direct indication that baptism was regarded as a condition to enter the kingdom of God. In *The Clementine Homilies* 11.26 about baptism, the question is asked if baptism with water will contribute to piety. After repeating the first reason (that it pleases God), the second reason given here is that it changes one from their ‘first generation’ (lust) in order to obtain salvation (ed. Schaff 1885d:1018). The author then interprets John 3:5 as follows: ‘Verily I say to you, unless ye be regenerated by living water into the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven’ (ed. Schaff 1885d:1018). One should therefore ‘flee to the water’ because only the water (baptism) will ‘quench the violence of fires’ (referring here to the spirit of strife) (ed. Schaff 1885d:1018).

Baptism also refers to the burial of Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit. Basil (ed. Schaff 1885o:186), in his *De Spiritu Sancto* 15.35 (‘Reply to the suggested objection that we are baptized ‘into water;’ also concerning baptism’), argued that we must become ‘imitators of Christ [being] buried with him by baptism’. That cuts the ‘continuity of the old life’, implicating that we should be born again into a second life ‘according to the Lord’s word’, referring here to John 3:3. Through baptism, that is, being buried in the water, we imitate the burial of Christ. Through baptism there is therefore a cleansing of the ‘works of the flesh’ and a ‘cleansing of the soul from the filth that has grown out on it from the carnal mind’. In this way, baptism becomes a ‘type’ of the resurrection of the dead. This is, according to Basil (ed. Schaff 1885o), why the water in John 3:5 is associated with the Spirit:

[B]ecause in baptism two ends were proposed; on the one hand, the destroying of the body of sin [Rm 6:6] that it may never bear fruit unto death [Rm 7:5]; on the other hand, our living unto the Spirit [Ga 5:25], and having our fruit in holiness [Rm 6:22]. (p. 187)

This links with the interpretation of John 3:3 by Gregory Nazianzen (ed. Schaff 1885o:763–764), who, in his *On Pentecost*, Oration 41.14 (ed. Schaff 1885n:763) interpreted the passage as referring to be ‘born again of the Spirit, [therefore] be cleansed again from the first birth’. This Spirit turns all evil into good.

In his *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 4.13 (‘Concerning the holy and immaculate Mysteries of the Lord’), John of Damascus (ed. Schaff 1885p:736) claims that everything that God has made shares in his goodness – ‘His own image and His own spirit’. However, in their own choice, humankind transgressed God’s command, causing God to become man in order to ‘cleanse us and make us incorruptible, and establish us once more as partakers of His divinity’ by means of a second birth, away from the carnal Adam to the spiritual Adam (ed. Schaff 1885p:736–737). Because we are therefore ‘of a double and compound nature’, the birth should be double and the food compound. The birth is by water and Spirit, referring here to the baptism (Jn 3:3), while the food is the bread of life – Christ (Jn 6:48).

With reference to the legality of baptism, Tertullian (ed. Schaff 1885b:1504) discussed John 3:5 within the framework of baptism, having a lengthy discussion about the ‘legality’ of the baptism by John the Baptist. The discussion is found in his treatise *On Baptism* 12, ‘Of the Necessity of Baptism to Salvation’.

During baptism, the righteousness of the baptised shines through. In his *Answer to the Letters of Petilian, the Donatist* 3.56, Augustine (ed. Schaff 1885g:1255) takes John 3:5 within the context of baptism, thus adding in the light of Matthew 5:20 that the righteousness of the baptised should be added to the sacrament if one is to enter the kingdom of God. This deviates from the traditional view that baptism is factually the only condition for the baptised to enter God’s kingdom.

In baptism, the will of the baptised is very important. In his *Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, Homily 3.1 on 1 John 2:18–27 (ed. Schaff 1885i:814), Augustine urges his ‘children [to] make haste to grow, because “it is the last hour”’. As this is dependent on the will of a person, Augustine (ed. Schaff 1885i:) links his argument to John 3:5, stating:

[W]here the being born rests with the will, the growth also rests with the will. No man is “born of water and the Spirit”, except he be willing, (that is to) go onward by proficiency. (p. 814)

It means that this person, being an infant in faith, will cling to their mother, who is the church, while her breasts are the OT and NT. No direct mention is made here of baptism, although it is implicit in the text.

Gregory of Nyssa (ed. Schaff 1885m:951), in his *Apologetic Works, The Great Catechism* 36, with reference to John 3:5, argued that only those who have cleansed themselves from all evil will be ‘admitted amongst the heavenly company ... [i.e.] the cleansing in the water and he who has been so cleansed will participate in Purity and true Purity is Deity’.

When baptising an infant, the parents’ sins are washed away from the infant. In *Letter* 98.2 to Boniface, Augustine of Hippo (ed. Schaff 1885e:898) refers to the sins of the fathers and the children, claiming that the parents’ sins do not affect their children. He argues that the virtue of baptism

as sacrament is so great because it brings salvation to the infant children. The bond of guilt from the parents is cancelled 'by the grace' of baptism (ed. Schaff 1885e:898). This work is carried out by the Holy Spirit by whom the infant is regenerated (with reference to Jn 3:5). The water 'holds forth the sacrament of grace in its outward form, and ... the Spirit ... bestows the benefit of grace in its inward power' (ed. Schaff 1885e:898).

In *A Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants* 2.11, Augustine (ed. Schaff 1885h) argues against the Pelagians, who postulated:

[I]f a sinner begets a sinner, so that the guilt of original sin must be done away in his infant son by his receiving baptism, in like manner ought a righteous man to beget a righteous son. (p. 212)

Augustine (ed. Schaff 1885h:212) reminds them that the son of a righteous man is also born with the 'concupiscence which is in his members', referring to John 3:6, stating that 'that which is born of the flesh is flesh', indicating therewith that all children are born equal before God. This is why the children of baptised or righteous people also need to be baptised (*A Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants* 2.43; ed. Schaff 1885h:253).

Still on the topic of the baptism of infants, Augustine (ed. Schaff 1885h:184), in his *Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants* 1.58, speaks out against the Pelagians, who regarded baptism necessary for infants. He starts with a combination of John 3:3 and 3:5: 'Except a man be born again – of water and the Spirit – he shall not enter into the kingdom of God'. Because of the latter part of this sentence, the Pelagians wanted their infants to be baptised in order to enter God's kingdom. Augustine (ed. Schaff 1885h:186) argues that only through the remission of one's sins does a baptised person enter God's kingdom: the 'old man' should be crucified with Christ (Rm 6:6) – 'men, from being earthly, shall become heavenly' – not children.

Lastly, the Church Fathers make a significant distinction between the baptised and the unbaptised. In his *City of God* 13.7 (*Of the Death Which the Unbaptised Suffer for the Confession of Christ*), Augustine (ed. Schaff 1885f:573) claims that, if an unbaptised witness of Christ dies, 'this confession is of the same efficacy for the remission of sins as if they were washed in the sacred font of baptism', indicating the high regard that bearing witness, compared with baptism, had for him. He then quotes John 3:5, immediately afterwards adding Matthew 10:32 to strengthen his point (which, in fact, served as an exception to the rule): 'Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven'. In his *On Baptism, Against the Donatists* 4.21–29, Augustine (ed. Schaff 1885g:819) argues that an unbaptised catechumen who dies in martyrdom is more worthy to God than a baptised heretic, referring again to John 3:5 within the context of baptism.

Still in his *City of God* 21.27, Augustine (ed. Schaff 1885f:1128) refers to a baptised man who is not justified, referring to two

texts to indicate that this man will not enter the kingdom of God – John 3:5: 'Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he shall not enter into the kingdom of God', and also Matthew 5:20: 'Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven'. For Augustine, it was unthinkable that, through fear, people would get baptised while not really caring for being justified.

Augustine (ed. Schaff 1885g:754), in his *On Baptism, Against the Donatists* 2.14–19, contemplates what is worse – 'not to be baptised at all, or to be twice baptised'. Here he refers to John 13:10 and 3:5, bringing both texts into the context of baptism:

For He said to Peter, 'He who is washed has no need of washing a second time', and to Nicodemus, 'Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God'. (ed. Schaff 1885g:754)

With this, he accuses the Catholic Church of his time that they do not admit an unbaptised person to their altar, but they have no problem with someone who is rebaptised.

In his *A Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants* 1.26, with the heading 'No One, Except He Be Baptized, Rightly Comes to the Table of the Lord', Augustine (cf. 1.25, ed. Schaff 1885h:143) quotes John 3:3 and 3:5 against 'some' (heretics?) who ascribed:

[T]o unbaptized infants, by the merit of their innocence, the gift of salvation and eternal life, but at the same time, owing to their being unbaptized, to exclude them from the kingdom of heaven. (ed. Schaff 1885h:144)

Augustine's *A Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants* 3.6 is directed against Pelagius. Here Augustine explicitly details that a sinful man who is not baptised belongs to the 'class of non-believers' (ed. Schaff 1885h:277), linking it to Mark 16:16(!): 'Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned', also taking John 3:5 into consideration. In *A Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants* 3.8, Augustine (ed. Schaff 1885h) is so adamant about John 3:5 and other scriptures that he asks:

[D]oes not truth proclaim without ambiguity, that unbaptized infants not only cannot enter into the kingdom of God, but cannot have everlasting life, except in the body of Christ, in order that they may be incorporated into which they are washed in the sacrament of baptism? (p. 279)

In 3.21 of the same treatise (ed. Schaff 1885h:721), still against Pelagius (*A Treatise on the Soul and its Origin*), Augustine (ed. Schaff 1885h:901) confirms what he has said in 3.6 (as explained). In 1.10 against Vincentius Victor, Augustine (ed. Schaff 1885h:721) has the same issue as against Pelagius, who argued that unbaptised infants will go to heaven, saying: 'I am of the opinion that for them, indeed, constant oblations and sacrifices must be continually offered up by holy priests'. Augustine blatantly rejects that:

[F]or who can offer up the body of Christ for any except for those who are members of Christ? Moreover, from the time when He said, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven"; and again, "He that loseth his life for my sake shall find it"; no one becomes a member of Christ except it be either by baptism in Christ, or death for Christ [baptism in blood; martyrdom – cf. 2.17]. (Quoting Jn 3:5 and Mt 10:39)

In Chapter 14, still against Victor, the main argument of Augustine (ed. Schaff 1885h:952) is that the latter 'sends those infants who die unbaptised to paradise and the heavenly mansions, but not to the kingdom of heaven'. Interestingly, they distinguished between 'paradise' and 'heavenly mansions' on the one hand and the 'Kingdom of heaven' on the other.<sup>6</sup> In Chapter 16, Augustine (ed. Schaff 1885h) argues that:

[V]ictor promises to the unbaptised paradise after their death, and the kingdom of heaven after their resurrection, although he admits that this opposes Christ's statement. (p. 955)

Victor therefore did not stop at paradise but regarded it as just an interim stage before going to the 'kingdom of God.' However, Augustine (ed. Schaff 1885h:956) is clear on the fact that this is against John 3:5, linking this to the disobedience of Saul in 1 Samuel 15:9. In *A Treatise on the Soul and its Origin* 3.17, Augustine (ed. Schaff 1885h:986) reflected on the kingdom of God, stating that if we pray, 'Thy Kingdom come', we actually imply 'that we may deserve to reign with Him, although under his power'. According to him, this is only applicable to the baptised (Jn 3:3–5). In 3.19 of this document, thus referring back, Augustine (ed. Schaff 1885h:989) repeats that the Catholic Church of his time was against those who thought that an unbaptised person would (first) go to paradise and later to the kingdom of God.

In *The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom on the Gospel of St. John*, Hom 25 on John 3:5, Chrysostom (ed. Schaff 1885r:176) argues that this 'fearful ... sentence' indicates that a person who is not baptised 'wears the raiment of death, of cursing, of perdition', making them an alien who has not yet received the 'royal watchword'. Chrysostom (ed. Schaff 1885r:177) argues that Jesus did not have an earthly birth in mind but 'another Birth', which is in reality separated from the first birth. Whereas in the first birth, God formed a person of earth and water, in the new birth, that person is formed of water and of Spirit and becomes a 'quickening Spirit' (ed. Schaff 1885r:178), referring here to the baptism where the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are at work (ed. Schaff 1885r:179), which he calls 'the hidden mystery' (ed. Schaff 1885r:180).

## 'The water refers to "more than baptism"'

As has been indicated, the Greek adverb ἄνωθεν in John 3:3 has at least two possible translations – 'again', which is the

6. Augustine (Schaff 1885h:952) here refers to what Victor argued about the words of Jesus to the man who died with him on the cross: 'Just as in the case of the thief on the cross, who confessed but was not baptised, the Lord did not give him the kingdom of heaven, but paradise'. Augustine comments on it: '...the words remaining accordingly in full force, "Except a man be born again of water and of the Holy Ghost, he shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven".'

most common translation for John 3:5, and 'from above'. Louw and Nida (1988:510) referred to the phrase γεννάω ἄνωθεν as an idiom that can be translated with 'to be born again'. Louw and Nida (1988:510) admitted that ἄνωθεν can also be translated with 'from above' or 'from God' (cf. Jn 3:31; 19:11), although Nicodemus understood it as meaning 'again', being part of a 'physical birth' (Louw & Nida 1988:510–511).

Kim (2021) suggested that ἄνωθεν should be translated with 'from above'. As this pericope refers to the kingdom of God,<sup>7</sup> Kim applies it to the here and now, based on the present verb form δύναται ('be able to') in both John 3:3 and 3:5. Therefore, '[i]f one is born from above and born through water and Spirit, one can see/enter the kingdom of God now' (Kim 2021:22). Based on the view of Culpepper (1998:42–61), it was important for the Johannine community, who were expelled from the Jewish synagogues, to be assured of their fixed place as children of God. They had to take ownership of the fact that they were 'born from above, born of water and Spirit' (Kim 2021:22).

Kim (2021:22) suggested that Nicodemus misunderstood Jesus by thinking about a physical instead of a spiritual birth. Over against the meaning of 'born again' (the temporal sense of a physical birth), Jesus did not have the 'when' of the birth in mind but the 'how' – it comes from God or from above, with God himself (his Spirit) as the source. Here, Kim refers to John 3:31: 'The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all'. Kim (2021:22) applied it to ἄνωθεν in John 3:3: "'To be born from above" means that one is born from God, which means to live according to God'. This 'evokes the image of water baptism', which connects with John 3:22, where it is stated that Jesus baptised people (cf. also Moody Smith 1999:95).

Kim (2021:23) regarded it as natural that Jesus had the conversion of people in mind, where they surrender themselves to God and start to live a new life with a new determination. He therefore takes the 'born of water' one step further by raising it above the water baptism. His reason is that water baptism occurs once, while this 'born of water' refers to a continuous yielding to God (Kim 2021:23). Once again, this can indeed be deduced from the passage, but the question remains whether it is really what the passage wants to state *per se*?

## The water refers to a physical birth

Over and against the suggestions being made here, I want to look at what the structure of John 3:3 and 5–7 shows us and then cursorily link it to the setting of the Nicodemus discourse.<sup>8</sup> John's gospel (like many other parts of the Bible) loves to make use of structures, as well as references to the

7. The phrase 'kingdom of God' is in fact foreign to the Gospel of John (cf. Groenewald 2006:196), only used in John 3 (twice) and 18 (thrice). According to Groenewald (2006:196), Jesus quoted a traditional phrase here, which is also found in Mark 10:15.

8. Nicodemus was a community leader and possibly a member of the Sanhedrin, according to John 3:10, a 'teacher of Israel' (cf. McCabe 1999:86).

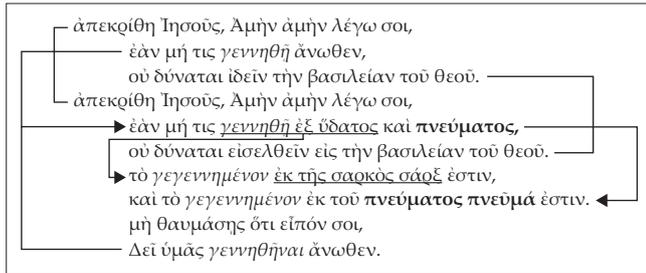


FIGURE 1: The structure of John 3:3 and 3:5–7.

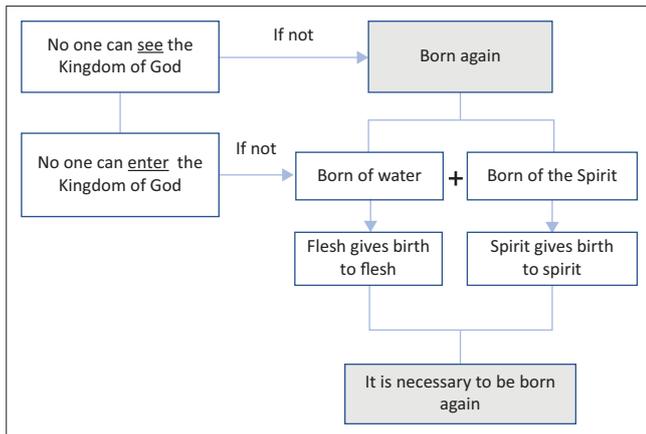


FIGURE 2: A schematic representation of John 3:3 and 3:5–7.

OT, while working with the NT message (cf. Foster 2017; McCabe 1999:86). John 1:1–18 acts as a very good example (DustinMartyr 2013; cf. Kolawole 2020:57–58).

In this pericope, only the structure of John 3:3 and 3:5–7 will be given as it has application on the following discussion (both Figures 1 and 2 are from my personal archives).

Γεννάω (pass. ‘be born’) is the main verb in this part of the pericope, being used five times – referring to both a physical and a ‘spiritual birth produced by God’ (McCabe 1999:88).<sup>9</sup> In line with the structure, ἄνωθεν should then be translated as ‘again’ because it refers to a ‘second birth’ – first of water<sup>10</sup> and then of the Spirit.<sup>11</sup> In his *Diatessaron* 32, Tatian (ed. Schaff 1885d:189) also translates ἄνωθεν with ‘a second time’. ‘Born again’ is extended to ‘born of water’ and ‘born of Spirit’. ‘Born of water’ is explained by ‘flesh gives birth to flesh’, whereas ‘born of Spirit’ is explained by ‘Spirit gives birth to spirit’.<sup>12</sup> These theses are encircled by ‘[it is necessary to be] born again’, indicating that this is the content of the action of rebirth, being the condition to see and enter the kingdom of God. It is important to indicate here that ‘you

9. Many scholars argue that the passive of the term γεννάω being used here, refers to the fact that the person is absolutely passive in the whole process, as the act is orchestrated by God (e.g. Hoekema 1989:97; McCabe 1999:88). However, this is not true, as this verb can only be translated with ‘to be born’ when it is used in the passive voice (cf. Newman 1983:36).

10. Michaels (2010:n.p.) averred that ‘water’ could act here as a ‘euphemism for the male sperm’, in the light of 1 John 3:9, where the term σπέρμα is used.

11. However, it will not change much of the meaning of the passage if one translates ἄνωθεν with ‘from above’.

12. Michaels (2010:n.p.), however, stated that the gospel does not draw analogies between ‘water’ and ‘Spirit’, but rather indicates a contrast between a spiritual and a physical birth, like in John 1:13. He reasons that the gospel does not use ‘born of water’ as reference to a physical birth in any other passage. In this passage ‘water’ is without any significance if not completed or complemented by ‘Spirit’.

must be born again’ need not be interpreted as an imperative (cf. Michaels 2010:n.p.), but, in fact, a necessity, which could be better translated with ‘it is necessary to be born again’. Augustine (ed. Schaff 1885h), in his *Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants* 2.43, concurs with this, although he puts John 3:5 in the context of baptism:

[W]herefore, as the man who has never lived cannot die, and he who has never died cannot rise again, so he who has never been born cannot be born again. From which the conclusion arises, that no one who has not been born could possibly have been born again in his father. Born again, however, a man must be, after he has been born; because ‘Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God’. (p. 253)

Chrysostom (ed. Schaff 1885k:499), in his *Homilies on Second Corinthians*, Homily 2.9 on 2 Corinthians 1:6–7, and with John 3:4 in mind, states ‘that we are born again of the waters, just as of the womb’. Ambrose (ed. Schaff 1885q), in his *On the Holy Spirit* 3.10.59 (‘The Divinity of the Holy Spirit’) against the Arians, puts John 3:5 in the context of a normal birth:

[N]icodemus enquires about regeneration, and the Lord replies: ‘Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again by water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God’. And that He might show that there is one birth according to the flesh, and another according to the Spirit, He added: ‘That which is born of the flesh is flesh, because it is born of the flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit, because the Spirit is God’. (p. 350)

Nicodemus was a learned Jew, a Pharisee, being educated especially in Jewish theology and, more specifically, in the Law. He did not indicate the reason for his visit to Jesus, but Jesus knew what to tell him: Jesus had the chance to ‘set things straight’ for this Jew regarding the kingdom of God. In what is discussed here, the content will show in which way Jesus took this conversation.

Nicodemus, and for that matter, all the Jews thought that being born a Jew – a descendent of Abraham – was assurance or insurance enough for them to enter God’s kingdom (cf. Guzik 2018). In this passage, the phrase γεννηθῆ ἐξ ὕδατος (‘born of water’) is ‘synonymous with being [born] an Israelite’ (Foster 2017:355). ‘Born of water’ refers to a physical birth, specifically being born a Jew. In John 3:5, this phrase is therefore used by Jesus to refer to the natural birth process, with ‘water’ referring to the amniotic fluid that surrounds the baby in the womb and is present during the birth process (cf. also Spriggs 1974:150). Strachan (1920:94) referred to 2 Esdras 8:8 where the term ‘water’ (combined with fire) is also a reference to the ‘water in the womb’.

However, Jesus told Nicodemus that, although being physically born is important, it must be succeeded by the second vital birth – being ‘born of the Spirit’ – vital in order for someone to enter the kingdom of God – a spiritual rebirth (cf. Witherington 1989:159). If one is therefore not born of

flesh (the first birth), it is impossible to be born of the Spirit – the former is a precondition for the latter, while the latter is a precondition for becoming part of the kingdom of God. John 3 thus has in mind ‘a shift in the locus of salvation from Israel to the Messiah in the coming age’ (Foster 2017:351; original emphasis; cf. also Spriggs 1974:150), the crossing (which is imminent here) from the Jewish way of thinking (‘born a Jew’ equals ‘becoming part of the kingdom of God’) to the new way that Jesus as Messiah was about to teach his people – to be born of the Spirit in order to become part of the kingdom of God.

Whereas the phrase γεννηθῆναι ἐξ ὕδατος alludes to being physically born a Jew (Foster 2017:351), Jesus clearly states that this is not enough to become part of God’s (new) kingdom. Those, then, who are born of Israel need to also be born again of the Holy Spirit. This points to the regeneration caused by the Holy Spirit, having the salvation of God’s people in mind (Foster 2017:355). It therefore indicates here that, in future, the true Israelites (people of God) will not only be the Jews, but ‘everybody’ who believes in Jesus – those who are born of the Spirit (born again; cf. Jn 3:15). Whereas the Jews have thought that being born a Jew was good enough for them to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus adds that ‘born of the Spirit’ or being ‘born again’ was required in the ‘new dispensation’ to become part of God’s people.

The exodus event could well serve as background for the Nicodemus discourse (cf. Sahlin 1950). Being ‘born of water’ could therefore function as an allusion to the OT context of the Exodus narrative, depicting a new beginning between God and his people (his children – cf. Dt 14:1; his firstborn son – Ex 4:22; even referring to God as their Father in Dt 32:6; McCabe 1999:86). Just as the exodus was a new beginning for Israel, so the Jesus event was a new beginning for the new Israel to become God’s children. This is in close proximity with John 1:12, where the author mentions that those who believe in the name of Jesus will become children of God.

The narrative in John 3 allegedly took place during the Passover (in the light of Jn 2:23), providing the setting for the Nicodemus discourse. It is possible to trace a stark parallel between the OT narrative of the exodus of God’s people from Egypt (starting with Passover) and the Gospel of John (cf. Enz 1957; Smith 1962). The author of John closely connects to the OT in his gospel when he refers to Jesus as being greater than Moses (Jn 1:17) and who brought about the redemption that God’s people had been looking forward to in the exodus narrative (cf. Beasley-Murray 2002:lix).

John the Baptist has already indicated in John 1:31–33 that Jesus would baptise with the Holy Spirit, acting as background for ‘S/spirit’ in John 3. It also acts as indication of a new beginning as shown by the Baptist’s use of Isaiah 40:3 in John 1:23 (cf. Keener 1993:266). The parallel between the narrative in John 3 and the exodus narrative is further extended by some key terms being used in John 3 that can be found in the exodus narrative. First, we read that Nicodemus talked to Jesus about ‘signs’ in John 3:2 – here

the author links the conversation to the exodus narrative, which was filled with signs. In John 3:14, the wilderness experience is explicitly mentioned, referring to Moses and the snake (Nm 21:8–9). During the exodus, the snake was lifted on a pole so that everyone who looked at it would live. Jesus foretold here that he would also be lifted up, but those who will look at him, that is follow him, will receive more than life – they will receive eternal life (Jn 3:15). Furthermore, the snake was only meant for the Jews who were in the wilderness, whereas Jesus had πᾶς (cf. Jn 3:15) in mind, that is ‘everybody’ who believes, who would not only be Jews. Second, John 3:2 states that Nicodemus visited Jesus during the night, which could be an allusion to Exodus 11:4, where Moses foretold that the firstborns of the Egyptians would die during the night (also Ex 12:12). Lastly, the birth language in John could refer back to Israel as God’s ‘firstborn son’ in Exodus 4:22–23 – which has already been alluded to (cf. McCabe 1999:87).

God’s children are therefore being born of the Spirit. In short, this refers to a Spirit-filled and Spirit-led life. As God is Spirit, his followers must worship him in Spirit and truth (cf. Jn 4:24). This life is a participation in Jesus’ life (cf. Jn 6:53–58).

## Conclusion

This article was not written to choose sides for or against any of the arguments provided but to give the most prevailing views on the occurrence of ‘water’ in John 3:1–7 – sometimes with a critical note to it. It also served to indicate how most of the Church Fathers sided with ‘water’ in John 3:5 as being a reference to baptism and then to supply the reader with a personal (subjective) view of the usage of ‘water’ in this passage. Having looked at the structure of this sub-pericope, as well as a schematical presentation thereof, the article reached the conclusion that ‘water’ could refer to the amniotic fluid, which is present during the birth process. This conclusion is reached as Jesus indicated that two events are necessary for seeing/entering the kingdom of God, that is to be born of both water and the Spirit. As this explanation needed more clarification, Jesus elaborated on it by explaining ‘water’ with ‘flesh gives birth to flesh’, and Spirit by ‘Spirit gives birth to spirit’. ‘Water’ is, therefore, directly connected with the birth process, while Spirit is directly connected to being born again of the Holy Spirit.

Being born a Jew, according to Jesus, was not (anymore?) sufficient to see or enter the kingdom of God, but it was to be succeeded by a second birth, that of the Holy Spirit. Nicodemus, being a Pharisee (Jn 3:1), was familiar with the OT scrolls in the Temple, and he would most probably have picked up the connection that Jesus brought about between the OT and their discourse. We do not read his response here, but we do read about him in John 19:39, where he and Joseph of Arimathea buried the body of Jesus after Jesus’ death on the cross. From this we deduce that he most probably understood Jesus’ words in the Nicodemus discourse.

Looking back at all the viewpoints in this article, it is obvious that all of them form part of this passage in one way or another. This passage is full of God's grace; it definitely refers to being born again or born of the Spirit; it refers to being cleansed before God; it points forward to the baptism of the convert and even to more than baptism. The point in this article is that it is 'not the water' in this passage that refers to all these wonderful things but the entire pericope itself.

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