

Is There A Need To Be Born Again?

*A study of the first 21 verses of John's
Gospel chapter 3.*

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truth,'*

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'God is spirit and they that worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth,'

With all the distractions around us today we would do well to heed these words from John's Gospel (4/14), for one of our greatest needs in these times is to know the truth and to live accordingly. Now there is only one sure place to obtain truth and that is in the infallible word of God. I use the word infallible deliberately, because logic demands that the Almighty, Himself infallible, would not have caused a book to be written for the guidance of His creation, that was anything less. The first step towards arriving at truth is therefore to realise this, and to accept the fact that the Bible is God's word, inspired by Him, and as such does not contain the thoughts or wisdom of fallible man. Nor is it permissible for man to alter the words of this book either by taking from or adding to it. Likewise he may not assume to have the ability, moral-intellectual, or otherwise, to criticize this, the work of his Maker. At the same time we should remember that our translations, though for the main part correct, are yet the work of men, and as such, will inevitably contain error. In the case of the Bible this is particularly so. For the men responsible for the translations - good men, learned men as no doubt they were - were yet religious men. And here lies one of our big problems, for the dogmas of religion hold fast the mind of man and translators with strong religious upbringing are certain to be influenced by their convictions and so introduced a biased religious interpretation into their work. For this reason it is necessary in studying the Bible to check the translation - against the meaning of the words of the original languages that God caused to be used. (Hebrew in the O.T. - Greek in the N.T.)

It is also necessary to worship Him in spirit. Now the spirit is manifest, not in our emotions or senses, nor in experiences, be they religious or otherwise, but by the use of our minds - by the way we think. Nay these things be kept in mind by any who read this article. For evidence, I will bring forward facts from the Word of God and endeavour to draw logical

conclusions from them. Let my readers check the evidence I submit and the deductions I draw, with minds that are open to receive truth.

Now the passages of John's Gospel that we are interested in, form the sole basis for the well known and widespread doctrine in religious circles, that a man 'must be born again'. These words are scriptural but only in so far as the A.V. attributes them to an utterance of our Lord in the 7th verse of this chapter. "Marvel not that I said unto thee, 'Ye must be born again.'" (A.V.)

The primary object of this present work is to examine the inspired text to see what Jesus did say to Nicodemus and whether it supports this doctrine. In other words to find out whether the doctrine is true or false. Starting at the beginning of the Chapter I will deal with each verse in turn.

In the first two verses we are informed that one of the Pharisees, a Jewish ruler named Nicodemus, visited Jesus by night. It would appear from this that the visit was made unobtrusively in order that his acquaintances should not get to know of it. Nicodemus made a statement to the Lord to the effect that they, he and his colleagues realised, that because of the signs He had shown, He was a teacher sent from God. Without waiting for more our Lord made a statement of his own to Nicodemus. It was a simple statement of fact, but contained such profound truth that Nicodemus was at first unable to grasp its meaning. The statement is recorded in the A.V. by the following words, 'Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'

As it is upon this that the doctrine of rebirth is established, I will now consider the key words of the verse. For a more detailed treatment of them see the analysis of each word in the Greek text appended to this article. (Appendix I - The analysis includes every word used throughout the 21 verses under consideration.)

Firstly, 'a man'. The Greek uses a relative pronoun, TIS, meaning 'anyone, someone, a person.' Although frequently translated into English as 'a man' here it probably has reference to the associates of Nicodemus, who were doubtless men of considerable standing in the Jewish commu-

nity. Consequently it has reference to anyone, irrespective of whatever rank or position he may hold.

"Except anyone `be born'. The Greek verb used here is *gennaō*, and this word has two distinct applications. The first and most usual is to the male parent, from whom comes the seed, the source of the new life being produced. When so used its meaning is `to beget'. Secondly, but more rarely, it is applied to the mother, whose function it is to bear the seed of the father. So applied it has the sense of `to be born' (as in the A.V.). There is however, nothing at all in this verse to indicate that the woman's part is in view. To Nicodemus the sound of the word as such, (i.e. taken on its own and without help from the context in which it occurs) could indicate either begetting or being born. However an adverb is used to qualify its meaning and this, as we shall see shortly, is such as to show that the function of a father is being referred to. Hence the word here means `to beget' and should not have been translated `be born'. This difference in meaning is by no means trivial and should not be overlooked.

The adverb used is the Greek *anōthen* and this has been rendered in the A.V. as `again'. This one small word is vital to our study, for upon its correct translation the true understanding of the whole of our Lord's teaching depends. Primarily *anōthen* means `from above'. Now all the lexicons and commentaries I have examined give `from above' as the meaning of this word, but some, in deference to the A.V., give a secondary meaning of again or anew as a usage in the N.T. only. This latter meaning is completely unwarranted and indeed has not been used anywhere in Greek literature except in this third chapter of John. (Even in this chapter there is a third occurrence, in Verse 31. where its correct meaning of `from above' is applied.) In the A.V. itself, the only two places where `again' is used for this word are this verse and verse 7. Even in these two occurrences there is little excuse for the reader accepting such a meaning for the marginal rendering is `from above'. The other occurrences of the word in the N.T. are treated in the following way 'in the A.V. Twice the adverb is used of time being translated `from the beginning' and `from the very first'. Once it occurs along with another adverb, *palin* (which does mean `again') and here the two words are together given the meaning `again'. In this instance the two words should

have been rendered again (palin), as before (anOthen). Invariably where this adverb is employed as an adverb of time it refers to past time. On every other occurrence the A.V. correctly applies the meaning, 'from above'. One of the lexicons, I have used, that of Prof. Dunbar, gives, in the body of the text, 'again' as one meaning of the word. Later, apparently after considerable research, he discovered this to be incorrect and has added a strongly worded

addendum to such effect at the end of his book. In my analysis of the Greek that follows this article I have quoted his remarks in full. I have also quoted fully from other authorities. Lexicons, commentaries, etc. The only conclusion that can possibly be drawn from all this is, that without any possible shadow of doubt, this word means 'from above' and in no circumstances may it be translated 'again'.

So then, let us give to our Lord's words a more literal and accurate rendition: "Truly. truly. I say unto thee, Unless anyone were begotten from above, he is not able to perceive the kingdom of God".

Before proceeding let us note that it is not what a man is that is important, but where he came from. We should beware of the widespread teaching today that attempts to belittle and reverse this fact. Nicodemus' associates were men of religious eminence, men of high rank and importance in the land, but Jesus was pointing out to him that this does, not imply that they have any ability to perceive or understand God's kingdom. By their acceptance of Him merely as a teacher they made this clear. Unlike Peter who declared "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God", they had failed to recognise Him as the Messiah, the King of Israel, the Son of God. Unless 'begotten from above'. He informed Nicodemus, they must of necessity lack the ability to perceive God's kingdom. Our leaders today are no different. In the Christian religion we have men of great learning and knowledge, men of high ecclesiastical prominence, men who wield very great power and influence, but unless the source from which these men came is 'above', they likewise are quite incapable of spiritual perception. They are unable to understand matters relating to the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus was astounded. How, he asked, was it possible for a grown man to again enter into the womb and so be born a second time? Here we have another important verse, for I have little doubt that the modern dogma of the need to be born again has been largely built on this complete failure of Nicodemus to understand Jesus' statement to him. Notice that it is he who introduces the mother's womb. This, as I have stated, alters the meaning of *gennaō* to 'to be born'. It is he also, that introduces the idea of 'a second time' into the discussion. But notice that the adverb he used was not *anōthen* but *deuteron*, which does mean 'a second time'. Now this was not because he thought *anōthen* had any such meaning if so he surely would have used it - but because he did not realise that the begetting (or 'birth', as he may have understood the word), that the Lord spoke about, coincided as to time with the natural process; of a man's birth. In other words, he would hear *anōthen* and know that it meant 'from above', but in applying begetting, or birth, to a grown man, he thought this must require a man to undergo a second process of birth. The idea of applying our Lord's mention of begetting to a man 'when he is old' was also supplied by Nicodemus. The Lord's statement when correctly translated, contained no hint of this. Nevertheless, at least this must be said to Nicodemus' credit, although he did not understand them, he took Jesus' words literally. He made no attempt to give them a 'spiritual' meaning and then to apply them to something entirely different. He did not imagine from them some happening whereby a man suddenly changes his whole way of life, becomes a mood-living 'Christian', and undergoing some remarkable emotional upheaval, which he interprets as being filled with the Spirit, goes on to live happily ever after! Such ideas were the brainchild of much later (and more advanced?) generations of mankind. Incidentally I fail to see the process of birth as a fitting symbol to represent such happenings, and in the Bible a symbol always very accurately portrays what it symbolises. (For the possible source of these translation errors, see appendix 2.)

The Lord now goes on to correct these ideas of Nicodemus and to explain further His meaning. Again the word *gennaō* is used, but this time it appears to have the more comprehensive idea of 'to bring into existence', and so includes both begetting and birth. The reason for this is that here it is applied at the same time to natural birth and to spiritual begetting. This

time He carries His remarks further and deals not merely with the ability to perceive, but also to enter the kingdom. He explains that anyone needs to be born 'from water'. This phrase is also misunderstood and has become the object of some rather wild speculation. One suggestion, which stems from Roman Catholicism, is that it is a symbol of baptism, though how the process of birth can represent baptism is not clear. Anyway, I can see no need to go beyond the plain meaning of the words, for 'born of water' is a clear reference to natural birth, the 'breaking of water' being one of the final indications that the process of birth is terminating and the new being is about to be brought forth. The second necessary qualification for entry is to have been begotten 'from spirit', and so another is being defined for us. Begotten from spirit is begotten from above, i.e. From the heavenly Father who, we are told, is spirit.

Thus it is that men born of the flesh, but having God's Spirit within them - His sons (and this is a literal expression) - are the only ones able to enter His Kingdom.

From this we pass to another simple statement but one that expresses a fundamental law; 'that which is begotten from the flesh is flesh, and that which is begotten from the spirit, is spirit'. Once more we should notice that it is a man's origin that is important. Then Nicodemus is told that he should not be astonished at being informed that anyone must have been begotten from above in order to have these privileges. Must? Yes must, for Jesus used the Greek word *dei*, which means 'it is binding, it is necessary, it is inevitable'. To gain entry into God's Kingdom it is necessary that a man has been begotten from above. No other can enter. Our Lord has declared this in clear, precise, unequivocal words. This is exclusiveness you will say. True, it is. All who are born into this world, not having this qualification of being begotten from above, are excluded on the strength of the Lord's own words. If we believe God, believe His Word, believe the statement of His Son as recorded in that Word, then we must accept and believe this as a fact. After all, surely the 'Christian' dogma, 'one MUST be born again' is every bit as exclusive.

The next verse as we read it in the A.V., always puzzled me and seemed somewhat out of place. It reads, 'The wind bloweth where it listeth, and

thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the spirit.' However an examination of the Greek yields something very different - 'He breathes the spirit where He wills and thou hearest His voice, but knowest not from what source it comes or whom it brings under its power: so is everyone who has been begotten from the Spirit.' When we read these words as they are in the Greek, we find that Jesus was talking of the actual inbreathing of God's Spirit into man. (Read Gen. 2/7; the whole of Gen.17; John 20/22.) It is His Spirit. He places it where it is His will to so do, and it is useless for mankind to attempt to obtain it in any other way. It is a gift from God, an act of grace (or 'favour'), and as such it is entirely His prerogative to bestow it where He wills. Where He has breathed His Spirit, a man is

brought into being who has been 'begotten from above'. Such a man is - and this is a literal fact a son of God. Being born with His Spirit within him, he is a 'spiritual' man, able to perceive spiritual matters, and ultimately to enter into God's Kingdom on earth.

But there is another very important thing to be observed in this verse. We have seen from verse 5, that 'begotten from the Spirit' defines the phrase 'begotten from above'. As already mentioned, the tenses of the verbs used in verse 3 clearly show that Jesus' words; could not refer to something that may happen in the future - i.e. to a second 'birth', as Nicodemus at first thought. The literal meaning of the words our Lord used in the last part of verse 8 is, 'so is all the one having been begotten from the Spirit'. This is perfect tense, and as Professor Machen's grammar states, 'The Greek perfect tense denotes the present state resultant upon a past action. Surely there can be no doubt that Jesus' words did not suggest that men must undergo some future experience of 'being born again'.

Nicodemus, though seemingly beginning to grasp the Lord's meaning, was still greatly puzzled that such things could be. Now, in the words Jesus used to chide Nicodemus for his lack of knowledge in these matters, we find a clue to God's plan for this world. Nicodemus was chided not simply for lack of His knowledge. but because as 'the teacher of Israel' he lacked that knowledge. Nicodemus must have been well versed in the

Scriptures (i.e. the O.T.), yet he apparently lacked understanding of them. Israel is the key, yet Nicodemus, who was one of Israel's teachers, appears to have been unaware that Israel was the actual seed of God. The Israel race carries His Spirit as a natural inheritance and so is 'begotten from above'. He should have known, that in the Adamic order, set up by Jehovah Himself, there were two seeds sown. One was the seed of the serpent, the other, the seed of the woman, was in fact God's seed. That seed came through from Adam to Abram, who demonstrated this by his ability to-perceive the things of God. That is, by showing that he was both able and willing to believe God. And we are told that this was 'counted to him for righteousness'. (Rom.4/3)

In Abraham, through Isaac and Jacob, God perpetuated His seed on earth. He did this by an act of grace, a free gift in the form of a covenant to Abraham and his progeny. This was the covenant of circumcision. It was the gift of His Spirit to remain in Abraham and his offspring throughout all history. A key to this aspect of the covenant lies in a small, overlooked statement in Gen.17/8 Literally translated from the Hebrew this reads. 'And I will be TO them FOR elohim (= creators)'. (For an explanation of this translation and its significance see my separate article, 'God and the Lord God'. Available on request.)

This race from Abraham's seed was to be called (or 'named') in Isaac and in Isaac alone. (The other sons of Abraham were completely excluded.) And so it was, for God called His name, Israel, upon one, and only one, of Isaac's sons, Jacob. So then it is Jacob's sons who possess God's Spirit by inheriting it from their father Abraham. Truly God 'breathed His Spirit where He willed'. Thus too, only Israel is His seed upon earth. They alone have been 'begotten from above' and have the ability to believe God, to perceive His Kingdom and finally to enter into it.

Jesus next points out that men who will not accept Him as to whence He came and Who He is, on the evidence of His work on earth, will be even less likely to accept anything He should tell them regarding heavenly matters.

Again as He continues, we see that His teaching is centred in and concerns only Israel. To show the necessity for His own death upon a stake, He reminds Nicodemus of the episode in the wilderness when Moses lifted up a serpent of brass upon a pole. This was peculiarly an episode in Israel's history. As Israel alone was in the desert it concerned no other people, and was the means by which God saved His people from the death of the fiery serpents.

The event was used to show, that in a like manner, and for a like reason, and for the same people, it was necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up on a pole. The reason was that everyone (lit. 'all the one') believing in regard to Him may possess eternal life. This limits the possession of eternal life to the one race that has the ability, or potential to understand, and hence to believe, God. This is why Rom. 4/11 refers to the sign of circumcision (the token of the Abrahamic covenant) as being given to Abraham 'that he might be the father of all them that believe'. (Rom. 4/11. AN.)

Directly following this reference to one of Israel's experiences in the wilderness we arrive at possibly the best known verse in the N.T., 'For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life'. (v. 16. A.V.).

It is remarkable how little consideration is given to the first word of this verse - 'For'. Being a causal particle 'for' connects the verse with what precedes it. Hence the verse should only be read in the context of the previous verses. That context is Israel, and the Lord's teaching to a 'master in Israel' of the necessity to have been 'begotten from above'.

'World' in this verse translates the Greek kosmos, a word which means, 'order, beauty, ornament; orderly arrangement or existence,' etc. It can in some circumstances apply to this world as a whole, it may refer to the natural order of mankind or, as in this, instance, to the special order on this earth that Jehovah Himself, Israel's God, has established. This is His people, Israel. The people to whom Paul refers as, 'spiritual' man as opposed to 'natural' man. (I Cor. 2/14,15).

Loving this order God gave 'His only begotten Son'. Reference to the Greek will again afford some interesting enlightenment. Literally this reads, 'the Son, the One only (i.e: `solely', without accompaniment') begotten of Himself'. That is say, not the only son he has begotten, but the One He has begotten entirely by Himself Note that the Lord is still teaching about begettal from above. Israel are also the sons of God, and is such must have been begotten by Him. But, as Jesus has just shown Nicodemus, they are the result of both human begettal and begettal from above. Not so our Lord, for He was born of a virgin and was not begotten by any human father. As the angel declared to Mary, 'The Holy Ghost, (= spirit) shall come upon thee and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that Holy Thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God'. (Luke 1/35. A.V.)

He was begotten ONLY from above.

`That whosoever believeth in Him'. Again, to render the Greek more accurately, `that all the one believing in regard to Him'. There is the same limitation that we saw previously - not all the order shall be saved but only that part of it, which having the ability to do so, will believe God. For the sake of the order that God loves, He has saved and redeemed it in order to replenish and preserve it. But on the other hand, due to Satan's rebellion, there is, in the all-embracing order of this world, another order that is not in harmony with God. This is an order, which lacking the inborn ability to perceive spiritual matters, does not believe God, does not believe regarding the name of His Son, or the efficacy of the work He completed here on earth, and so is not able to perceive or enter the Kingdom of God. Such an order, originating as it does in evil, produces works of evil, and so must perish. Those who will receive eternal life are those who believe God. And Abraham is `a father of all the believing ones'. (Rom.4/11, literally from the Greek. An explanation of these things is also provided in the article, `God and the Lord God').

Nicodemus is now told that God's purpose in sending His Son was not to judge this order but to save it. That is, to restore to the order the perfect balance and harmony that it had before the rebellion of Satan and his followers upset it. To accomplish this restoration there must be destruc-

tion. The destruction of Satan, the destruction of all under his control, and of all their works. All these must come under judgement and the judgement has already been carried out. It is, that they have not believed as to the name of the Son who was begotten only of Himself. (They did not believe and recognise His origin.) But, and this is an important statement, those who do believe ARE NOT JUDGED. Like Abraham, their belief is counted unto them as righteousness. Or as Isaiah states, 'their (Israel's) righteousness is of Me saith the Lord'. Paul also had this in mind when he wrote, 'Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect.' (i.e. Israel). It is God that justifieth.

The basis of the judgement that came upon these men was that they rejected the light that came into the order. This light is the energy or spirit of God, and where there is the ability to receive it, the mind is illuminated by it. Mankind generally did not want this, but preferred to live worthless lives, seeking the pleasures of the senses rather than spiritual enlightenment. Such men detest such light for it exposes the evil nature behind their actions. On the other hand some men seek spiritual light and are glad to have it reveal their inner thoughts. It reveals that they believe God and seek truth in order to live and enjoy life as He would have them do. Such men worship God for they 'worship in spirit and in truth'.

It is now my hope that this study has thrown light upon the doctrine that insists on our being 'born again'. If, as I think I have shown, the doctrine is untrue, then it is not of God, and by holding it we are not worshipping Him.

Again I believe that by correcting our translation, these verses have been illuminated to reveal the peculiarly Israel theme that our Lord was presenting to Nicodemus - and to us.

And now I have finished my task. I have presented my evidence and my deductions and I leave it to the reader to check both with God's Word. I hope that the analysis of the Greek text that accompanies this article will assist him to do this, and I hope also that it may inspire him to apply similar methods to investigate other passages.

'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for He hath visited and redeemed His people'.

To facilitate the typing of Greek letters into English, the following have been used:

E = epsilon. E = eta. o = omicron O = omega.

Where the definite article is present in the Greek, but is not required in English, it is marked thus. *God = the God.

Where a word is understood from the context, but not actually present in the Greek, it is printed in italics e.g. *ho pisteuOm* (Lit. 'the believing) is rendered 'the ones believing'.



**"For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the
Word of the Lord from Jerusalem"
(Isaiah 2:3)."**

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