

Baptisms 309: John 3:5 – Born of Water and Spirit



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Brian K. McPherson and Scott McPherson

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John 3:5 – “Born of Water and (the) Spirit”

1) Is this one birth or two births? In the Greek, there is no article before the work “Spirit.” And the grammatical implication is that the preposition “of” relates to both “water” and “spirit” to the same action of being born. In other words, the Greek grammar requires looking at the word “born” as a singular event or process, rather than in reference to two births. Therefore, although the wider passage would discuss two births, this verse would discuss one birth.

2) If this is only one birth, does that demand that water baptism is in view because birth “of water” is mentioned or, consequently, that water baptism and baptism in the Holy Spirit coincide according to this verse?

Regarding question 1:

There are some questions concerning how tightly the grammar governs the concept.

Here we want to distinguish between the word before the prepositional phrase (in this case “born”) and the words that are the objects of the preposition (“water” and “wind/spirit.”) The most important issue here is whether this grammatical construction dictates that “born” refers to a single birth, not whether “water” and “wind/spirit” are a unit. However, as a secondary issue we will also cover whether or not grammar dictates that the objects of the preposition function as a unit. Because it is less central, we will start with objects of the preposition.

For instance, 1 Timothy 1:5 uses the same pronoun (“ek”) as we find in John 3:5 and applies it to three nouns connected by “and” (“kai” in Greek), including “a pure heart,” “a good conscience,” and “unfeigned faith.” This prepositional phrase starts with a noun, not a verb like John 3:5. However, the prepositional phrase that follows is similar and uses one instance of the preposition connected to multiple nouns, which suggests their treatment as a collective whole applied to the noun at the start of the prepositional phrase. It is certainly possible to think of “a pure heart” and “a good conscience” as virtually synonymous. However, faith is clearly a distinct item from a heart or a conscience. So, 1 Timothy actually provides an example in which the objects of this kind of prepositional phrasing may function as virtual synonyms but it also constitutes an example in which they may not.

Likewise, Revelation 5:9, 7:9, and 11:9 all connect the word “ek” to the nouns “kindreds,” “people,” “tongues,” and “nations,” all connected by “kai.” It is clear that there are many separate groups included here from which the “saints” have “come out.” While chapter 7:9 and 11:9 both begin the critical prepositional phrase with nouns similar to 1 Timothy, chapter 5:9 begins with a verb like John 3:5. Specifically, Revelation 5:9 begins with the verb “redeemed.”

These examples illustrate for us that the grammatical structure in John 3:5 does not demand that the objects of the preposition must be viewed as a unit, although it certainly also allows for them to be. The point here is that the grammar doesn't require either conclusion.

For an example in which the objects of the preposition are more or less synonyms for the same thing, we turn to Luke 2. It is noteworthy that like John 3:5, Luke's prepositional phrase begins with a verb. In this case the verb is “to be” in the phrase describing that Joseph “was” of certain ancestry. Specifically, in Luke 2:4 Joseph is said to be “of (ek) the house and (kai) lineage of David.” Although not entirely synonyms, these two concepts have enormous overlap in meaning and relationship two one another. In fact, there is so much overlap and relationship between these two terms conceptually that it would be unfair to refer to them as describing entirely separate things. Rather they are actually being used to describe the same thing from only slightly differing perspectives in order to reinforce the same essential feature, the direct biological and hereditary tie that Joseph had to David.

We might also note similarities with Revelation 5:9 in this regard. While it is true that Revelation 5:9 is going out of its way to describe the many, varied groups that the saints have come out of, it is also true all of the terms used to designate those groups significantly overlap or closely relate to one another in meaning. A cursory look at the nouns makes this obvious. The verse lists “kindreds,” “people,” “tongues,” and “nations.” The difference between these terms is a matter of nuance, not strictly distinct categories. Like the “house” and “line” of David listed in Luke 2:4, here the point is to describe a similar concept emphatically and to make sure every conceivable nuance of this concept is covered, rather than to delineate entirely unrelated, conceptually distinct items. This implies that the use of “water” and “wind/spirit” in John 3:5 is not meant to designate literal water in physical baptism and the conceptually very distinct regeneration by the Holy Spirit, but rather “water” and “wind” are both being used to emphatically describe nuances of the same basic concept, rebirth by the Holy Spirit. The point is not that the grammar would require John 3:5 to mean that the rebirth by the Holy Spirit happens at water baptism. On the contrary, if “water” and “wind” both refer to the rebirth by the Holy Spirit, it would mean that water baptism is not referred to at all in John 3:5. Both terms would refer instead to the Holy Spirit. Therefore, adding “water baptism” into our interpretation would constitute an extraneous imposition on the text.

We'll see another example in which the objects of the verb could either be describing the same thing or possible two very different events later on when we examine Matthew 3:11 below. As we conclude our examination of this secondary issue, we can see that the grammatical construction in John 3:5 neither demands nor prohibits that the objects of the preposition function as a single unit or as synonyms.

This brings us to the central issue under examination here. As stated earlier, the primary question is what implications this grammatical construction has regarding the meaning of the word before the preposition. Does it force the word before the preposition to act as a singular in some sense? Here again, we turn to an example to clarify the constraints of the grammar.

In Acts 26:15-17, we find an account of Paul's conversion when Jesus appeared to him. In verse 17, Jesus speaks of how Paul will be delivered from (ek) the people and (kai) the Gentiles. Like John 3:5, the prepositional phrase is preceded by a verb. John 3:5 refers to being "born of water and spirit" and here we have being "delivered from the people and the Gentiles." It is important to understand that the phrase "the people" is a reference to the Jewish people as is recognizable by its clear distinction and juxtaposition from the term "the Gentiles" in the immediate context. But even more importantly, any student of Paul's life knows that he was delivered on more than one occasion. For example, in Acts 9:23-25, Paul is delivered from the Jews while in Damascus. Shortly afterward, Acts 9:28-29 records that Paul goes to Jerusalem where the Greeks try to kill him but he is delivered. In Acts 14:19-20, Paul is stoned (the Jewish form of execution) by the Jewish people from Antioch and Iconium. God delivers him from death at their hands. And in Acts 19:22-41, the pagans are stirred to wrath against Paul by one of their craftsmen, but yet again circumstances prevail in Paul's favor and he survives the perilous riot.

Acts 14:2, 5-6 is also interesting because it relates to the secondary issue that we discussed earlier. This chapter presents a single account in which it specifies that both the Jews and the Gentiles acted together to assault Paul who again escaped. Acts 14 demonstrates that the two objects of the preposition (in this case Jews and Greeks) can function as a single unit in a single event, even while in other instances related to this same prophecy, the Jews and the Gentiles function entirely separately in different events. In this case, we even see that the presence of the articles in front of "people" and "Gentiles" likewise do not impact the issue. Despite the presence of "the" in front of both words, the Jews and the Gentiles both act separately and also together on different occasions. Once again, the grammar does not necessitate or prohibit the objects of the preposition acting as a unit. The grammar is open to either option.

Returning to the primary issue, the most important lesson from Acts 26:17 is that here we have a parallel construction in the Greek grammar to what we find in John 3:5. In both passages, the critical phrases begins with a verb, "born" and "delivering," described by the preposition "ek" applied to two nouns connected to one another by "kai." But in Paul's case, we know the verb "deliver" refers to

more than one act of deliverance. This strongly suggests that the verb phrase “must be born” in John 3:5 does not have to refer to only one act of birth. It could, at least grammatically, refer to two births just as much as Acts 26:17 refers to multiple deliverances. We’ll talk more about this below in relation to the idea of being made as a process. Ultimately, the grammar is open and doesn’t demand either conclusion.

Lastly, author Robert V. McCabe analyzes the grammatical construction in John 3:5 in comparison to Matthew 3:11, which he views as a parallel. Arguing in favor of the conclusion that “born” must describe a single unit, he writes:

“While I recognize that John 4:23 provides support for a ‘water-spirit’ birth, Matthew 3:11, in contrast, provides support for taking this as a ‘water-and-Spirit’ birth. In this text John the Baptist proclaims that Jesus would ‘baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (βαπτισει εν πνευματι αγιω και πυρι).’ As in John 3:5, we have a preposition εν governing two anarthrous nouns, πνευμα and πυρος. The baptism that would be performed by Jesus is accomplished by two means: the Holy Spirit and fire, with the preposition εν embracing both of these elements.” – The Meaning of “Born of Water and the Spirit” In John 3:5 by Robert V. McCabe,* DBSJ 4 (Fall 1999): 85–107

First, notice for future reference the idea of baptism as accomplished “by two means.” Second, McCabe is clearly focused at the start of the quote on the extent to which “water” and “spirit” function as a unit in John 3:5. Nevertheless, in his examination, he utilizes Matthew 3:11 as a grammatical parallel even though it uses the preposition “en” instead of “ek.” When we look at Matthew 3:11, the critical phrase reads, “baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire.” Notice that like Acts 26:17, this passage is speaking of something that Jesus will do for someone. In Acts 26:17, Jesus says he will deliver Paul. In Matthew 3:11, John the Baptist says that Jesus will baptize his followers. Both start with verbs and both contain the grammatical construct under investigation regarding prepositional phrases.

So, how many acts of baptism are in view here in Matthew 3:11? One baptism, comprised in some sense of both fire and wind/spirit? Or two baptisms, one of fire and one of wind/spirit? And more importantly, does the grammar demand one or the other of these conclusions?

Baptism with the Holy Spirit is certainly fulfilled in Acts 2. And it is also true that on this occasion, a mighty wind blew about the house where the disciples were staying and tongues of fire appeared above the disciples’ heads when they received the Holy Spirit. Acts 2:2 uses the Greek word “pnoe” (Strong’s No. 4157) to refer to the “breath” or “wind” that swept around and into the house. Likewise, it uses the Greek word “pleroo” (Strong’s No. 4137) for the word “filled” when saying this wind “filled all the house where they were.” Although the words are slightly different, this is immediately connected to verse 4, which uses the Greek word “pneuma” (Strong’s No. 4151), which also generally refers to “a movement of air, breath, or wind.” In fact, “pnoe” and “pneuma” are closely related and derived from the same verb, “pneo” (4154) meaning “to breath or

blow.” Similarly, instead of “pleroo,” verse 4 uses “pletho” (Strong’s No. 4130) in the phrase “they were all filled with the Holy Ghost” or more literally “holy wind.” Again, these two words are very closely related and in this case “pleroo” is derived ultimately from “pletho.” Given the immediate contextual connection and the nearly synonymous meaning, it would be impossible not to equate the “wind” that fills the house in verse 2 with the Holy Spirit that fills the disciples in verse 4. No doubt, it is the Holy Spirit who is blowing about the house.

More importantly, if Acts 2 is intended to describe the fulfillment of baptism in both the Holy Spirit and fire as described in Matthew 3:11, then it is clear that both “wind” and “fire” are metaphorical representations for the Holy Spirit. Neither term is being used to designate any action with literal wind or literal fire. (Notice that Acts 2:2-3 describes both the wind and the fire using the Greek words “hosper,” Strong’s No. 5618, and “hosei,” Strong’s No. 5616, both meaning “like” or “as” in the sense of analogy.) The impact of this fact on John 3:5 would be that both “water” and “wind” would be metaphorical references to the Holy Spirit. “Water” could not designate a birth or baptism with literal water any more than the “fire” in Matthew 3:11 designates Jesus pouring out literal fire over believers.

However, it should be noted that throughout the rest of the New Testament discussion of baptism in the Holy Spirit, fire is never again mentioned. While the parallel to the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire that led the Israelites in the wilderness remains conceptually important to Acts 2, there are at least two other, very plausible meanings for the idea of “baptism with fire.”

First, there is the idea of the fire of destruction that will purge the earth itself when Christ returns at the end of the age. This fire is spoken of in various passages (Matthew 13:40, 42, 50, Matthew 25:41, Luke 3:17, 2 Peter 3:7, 12, and Revelation 17:16, 18:8, 20:9). However, these references appear to be a very literal kind of fire. Since both John 3:5 and Matthew 3:11 employ the Greek term “pneuma” (which can literally mean “a movement of air or the wind”) to refer to “spirit” or “the Holy Spirit,” it is perhaps less probable that Matthew 3:11 is meant to refer to literal fire. Still, the use of fire to designate purification by means of the destruction of the wicked is used in the immediate context of Matthew 3:11. In fact, it’s in the very next verse.

Second, there is also the idea of fire as a purifying agent in the metaphorical sense of the trials suffered by the righteous. Various passages present this idea (Mark 9:49, Romans 12:20, 1 Corinthians 3:13-15, 1 Peter 1:7, and Revelation 3:18). This is distinct from the option presented above in which a type of literal fire acts on the wicked. Interestingly, in Luke 12:49-50, Jesus speaks of bringing fire to the earth in contextual connection to Jesus himself being baptized. The contextual comparison in Luke 12 to Jesus’ own baptism can only logically refer to his impending suffering and perhaps by extension to the subsequent but connected persecution of Jesus’ followers (John 15:20). Jesus’ statements in Matthew 20:22-23 and Mark 10:38-39 would also support this conclusion. In these two passages, Jesus’ refers to his (and his followers) trials as baptisms. There is also a strong

parallel between Luke 12 in which Jesus declares that he will bring fire to the earth and John the Baptist's declaration in Matthew 3:11 that Jesus will baptize with fire. This suggests persecution of the righteous is in view in both Luke 12 and in Matthew 3:11 when baptism with fire is discussed. And certainly, trials and sufferings are a frequent purifying agent in New Testament texts. Adjacent references to the fiery destruction of the wicked are also explained. After the righteous suffer metaphorical fiery persecution from the wicked to purge the righteous, God will employ literal fiery destruction to punish the wicked and purge the earth of wickedness. The fiery baptism of the righteous and the fiery destruction of the wicked are two halves of the same coin and, therefore, can be mentioned right alongside one another as we see in Matthew 3:11-12.

If either of these two options, persecution of the righteous or destruction of the wicked, are what is intended by "baptism with fire," then we have in fact two very distinct acts of baptism being described by the grammar in Matthew 3:11. Baptism with "wind/spirit" represents the work of the Holy Spirit on believers starting when we accept God's word and completing when we are made immortal when Christ returns. This is an entirely different baptism than purification that occurs by trials and sufferings or the removal of the wicked from the earth by divinely orchestrated destruction.

Consequently, our examination of parallel grammatical examples demonstrates that even if a whole process is in view as unit, that process can certainly have component parts or events occurring at different points in time, such as two baptisms that serve the larger process of purifying us from start to finish or two births that serve the larger process of making or forming us from start to finish. Moreover, Acts 26:17 and Matthew 3:11 provide strong evidence showing that the key grammatical structure under investigation does not and cannot demand a single event, whether one act of being born or one act of being baptized or one act of being delivered. Furthermore, the grammar also places no demands whatsoever on whether the objects of the preposition must be viewed as a unit or can act as distinctly different events.

Regarding question 2:

If the "birth" is an absolute singular event, this still does not demand that water baptism is in view. Nor does it therefore subsequently demand that water baptism and baptism in the Holy Spirit coincide.

A similar grammatical construct in Luke 2:4 and Revelation 5:9 shows that the objects of the prepositions in this phrase can be items with near or complete conceptual overlap. (At least the first two objects of the preposition in 1 Timothy 1:5 suggest this as well.)

Similarly, if the baptism in "wind/spirit" and "fire" is fulfilled in Acts 2, then both components in the phrasing refer to the same thing. Consequently, baptism in "water" and wind/spirit" in John 3:5 could also refer to the same thing. In other words, both could easily refer to baptism of the Holy Spirit without referring to

baptism with water at all. The evidence for this mounts significantly given the following facts. First, “water” is used to symbolize the Holy Spirit in the adjacent chapters of John 4 and John 7. Second, the use of “pneuma” as a metaphorical application of “wind” in John 3:5 suggests a metaphorical, rather than literal, interpretation of water. (In fact, the direct juxtaposition of “pneuma” to the substance of water itself strongly suggests that “pneuma” is intended to invoke the idea of wind, albeit metaphorically.) And third, the metaphorical use of fire in comparable texts such as Matthew 3:11 also demands a symbolic, rather than literal, interpretation of the water in John 3:5.

(Conversely, as already stated above, if Acts 2 is not taken as a fulfillment of baptism in fire, then there must be two distinct baptisms in Matthew 3:11 in which case the same construct in John 3:5 would not demand a single birth.)

Moreover, the use of “water” and “wind” as parallel metaphors for the Holy Spirit would have been well known to Nicodemus given that the Hebrew language used the same term for both “wind” and “spirit.” Isaiah 44:3-5 speaks of God “pouring water” upon the dry ground and “pouring wind” or “pouring spirit” upon the seed of Israel, conveying the idea of giving the Spirit to Abraham’s descendants. Similarly, Ezekiel 36:25-27 speaks of God applying “clean water” and giving a “new wind” or “new spirit,” both as references to purifying the people. Such language in Isaiah and Ezekiel would have been known to Nicodemus and suggests that the terms “water” and “wind” (or “pneuma”) in John 3:5 refer metaphorically to the same thing (God’s Spirit), rather than separating “pneuma” as a reference to the Holy Spirit and “water” as a reference to literal water of baptism.

Some Closing Thoughts

In addition to the analysis provided above, we would like to conclude by offering some additional possibilities to consider on this topic.

One of the questions we have been asking throughout this discussion is whether John 3 refers to one birth or two births. It is important to point out, however, that the key phrase in John 3:5 does not actually refer to or mention the noun “birth.” Instead, it uses the verb for “begetting.” For contrast, Matthew 1:18 refers to the birth of Jesus using the noun “genesis” (Strong’s No. 1083). Similarly, John 9:1 refers to the birth of a blind man using the noun “genete.” John 3:5 doesn’t use either of these nouns, nor any other noun. Rather, it uses the verb “gennao” (Strong’s No. 1080), which means to be “begotten” and is derived from “ginomai” (Strong’s No. 1096). “Ginomai” means simply “to become or come into existence.” While the word “gennao” used in John 3:5 is constantly used in reference to the birth, it may be perhaps best to think of it in reference to gestation starting with conception and punctuated by birth, rather than solely as a reference to birth.

Further support for this meaning stems from two places.

First, the very frequent association of “gennao” with fathers. In fact, in the Online Bible Greek Lexicon, the primary definition of “gennao” is “of men who fathered children.” The usage “of women giving birth to children” is listed as a subordinate definition. If “gennao” simply referred to the act of giving birth, it is easy to see how such a verb could be applied to women. Women give birth to babies. But as a matter of biological fact, men do not give birth to babies. So, when Matthew 1 begins with 40 occurrences of “gennao” to describe men who fathered children spanning, we must ask exactly what this verb is denoting since it clearly is not denoting that these men are giving birth to these children. Clearly, on a fundamental level, “gennao” is crediting these fathers for producing these children, but the fathers’ role in producing the child is limited to conception.

Second, in Matthew 1:18 describes how Jesus’ mother Mary “was espoused to Joseph,” but “before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.” Then in verse 20, the angel of the Lord speaks to Joseph about Mary, saying, “that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.” Verse 21 goes on immediately to state, “And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus.” The word “conceived” here is “gennao.” Given the contextual and linguistic comparisons to the phrase “found with child” in verse 18 as well as the fact that verse 21 demonstrates that Jesus had not yet been born, it is clear that “gennao” here refers to the initiation of the incarnation of the pre-existing Word from an ovum in the womb of Mary. While this is not a normal conception given that Jesus’ does not have a human paternal contribution to fertilization, it is exactly parallel to conception. The author of this passage was not, of course, inventing a new term to refer to incarnation. He was instead, using the normal word referring to the initiation of human gestation.

Moreover, we must also consider that this use [which use? John 3:5] of “gennao” occurs in close contextual connection to the 40 references of fathering children that occur in verse 1-17 of the same chapter. Taken together, Matthew 1, which is the first chapter of the New Testament, provides very strong evidence right up front that “gennao” is not a reference to giving birth but to the act of producing children starting at conception.

So, what is the relevance of pointing out that “gennao” is a verb that describes the process of human gestation starting at conception rather than a noun that identifies the event of birth?

First, this is important because events, such as birth, tend to be singular and short-lived in time. But actions can take place over extended periods. Actions can be processes that require time.

Second, for example, it takes roughly 40 weeks to complete the process of making a human being if we start from conception and conclude at birth. Although we exist instantly at conception as unique, individual beings, we are being “made” over the course of the entire 9 months. Psalm 139:13-16 declares, “For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother’s womb. I will praise

thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well. My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them.” In this Psalm, we clearly see the idea that we are “made” over a period of time in the womb of our mothers. However, we can easily distinguish different steps along the way, such as the difference between conception and birth, although we could also include the development of fundamental features such as bones, eyes, or skin.

Third, it is fair to ask whether the process of “making” a human being stops at birth. Technically speaking, the body is not mature or complete at birth. We continue to grow all through childhood until we reaches the dramatic maturing process of adolescence in the teenage years. In a biological sense, we still continue to be “made” as human beings at least until the point when we reach adulthood.

(On a related note, the overall depiction in the New Testament compares the 9-months between conception and birth to the time of growth between our first belief of the gospel to the immortalization of our bodies when Christ returns. The biblical arguments expounding this view can be found in our article titled, “Born Again Study.”)

But how does this relate to John 3:5? As we have said, the critical issue here is the idea of “begetting” or “being made” as a process that takes place over time with differing discernable steps. It is the action and process of reproduction that is invoked by “gennaō,” not strictly the singular event of birth itself. And this is relevant regarding the argument that John 3:5 must denote a “single” begetting, a single act of “gennaō.”

First, it means that even if a single act of “gennaō” is in view, it does not need to be a single, specific event limited to a particular point in time. It can be a process comparable to the process of forming a human being for 9 months from conception to birth.

Second, in this light, even if John 3:5 grammatically required a single act of “gennaō,” it would not require that all the discernable steps or components must occur simultaneously. For instance, the water baptism of John the Baptist occurred many years before the outpouring of the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, as outlined in our general Baptism study. This means that for a great many early Christian disciples, water baptism and baptism in the Holy Spirit did not occur at the same time. Consequently, for those who believe that John 3:5 refers to a single birth involving both water baptism and regeneration by the Spirit, New Testament history itself prohibits John 3:5 from demanding that the 2 discernable components of this single act of “gennaō” (water baptism and baptism in the Holy Spirit) must happen simultaneously.

Third, in a larger scope, what Jesus is describing here in John 3:5 is the begetting or making of a human being. There are several points worth considering here.

Number one, although that process may take time, each person is not created twice. By way of analogy, we might think of the process of making a modern car. When is the car “made”? When the chassis is welded together? What if the chassis was entirely formed but it lacked the engine? Or the wiring and computing components? Or what if it lacked the gas and could not go or function? The point here is that the assembly line has many steps along the way between nothing and a fully-functioning vehicle, which does everything its designer intended. It is a process. There is more than one step or one action that “makes” the car. To the contrary, the entire process from start to finish is “making” the car. Even if separated by months or years, we would not speak of making the chassis as one “making” of the car and then the wiring system and engine as second, separate, “making” of the same car – as if later steps were not part of the original construction. These steps would not be “two” makings. They are both part of the same, single construction of the complete car with all its designer intended. Although this is just an analogy, it explains something we already know that is being obscured by misperception about what it means for John 3:5 to describe a single “birth.” And that leads us to our next point.

Number two, logically speaking if God our Creator has always intended humans to exist in a quickening relationship to His Holy Spirit (ultimately immortalized), then both our generation from our human parents and our generation by God’s Spirit are all part of the same, long process of making a human being, of our becoming what God intended to make us. We must remember that it was God who put in place the process of human procreation and who commanded Adam and Eve to make more humans by multiplying. And that reproduction from our parents is not irrelevant or extraneous to the process of entering the kingdom, which is the goal Jesus discusses during John 3:5. First, in creating Adam and Eve, it was God’s decision for those who would be quickened by his Spirit to be initially brought into existence via human reproduction from Adam. Second, just as much as no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of God, it is equally true that we won’t find any human beings inheriting the kingdom who were not first also begotten by human parents. Both parts of the process are necessary. (Incidentally, although this doesn’t prove the inclusion of human birth in John 3:5, if begetting from our human parents is a necessary step to entering the kingdom, it does seem all the more reasonable to include it in the process of making the kind of person who can enter the kingdom, which is the subject of John 3.) Ultimately, in terms of the process of how a man who enters the kingdom is “made,” both human reproduction and quickening by the Holy Spirit are part of that process.

Number three, it must also be addressed whether it is even possible for John 3:5 to connect water to physical birth. It has been suggested that the connection between “water” and birth from our mothers is a modern one. And, if that is true, then perhaps interpreting “born of water” as a reference to physical birth is superimposing modern concepts onto an ancient culture that would not have been

aware of them. However, there are several factors that support the idea that human birth could potentially be intended by the phrase “born of water.”

First, John 1:12-13 has already established an explanatory juxtaposition between physical birth from our human parents and birth by the Spirit of God.

Second, if we look at the surrounding verses around John 3:5, we see that physical birth from our mothers is mentioned in verse 4 with the phrase “into his mother’s womb, and be born,” and in verse 6 with the phrase “that which is born of flesh is flesh.” In fact, the contrasting of physical birth to spiritual birth in verse 6 cannot be blamed on Nicodemus confusion since verse 6 is an affirmation stated by Jesus’ himself. So, we have great contextual reasons to suspect the phrase “born of water” refers to physical birth since physical birth is so often contrasted with spiritual birth in John 1 and 3.

Third, the argument is sometimes made that it would serve no purpose for Jesus’ to mention physical birth here, since it would be obvious to Nicodemus that all men are physically born. In short, this argument suggests that interpreting “born of water” as a reference to physical birth essentially deprives Jesus’ statement of any real meaning or purpose. But this argument is fairly superficial. For example, if Jesus’ point is to underscore the importance of birth by the Spirit of God, it would make perfect sense for him to explain to Nicodemus that birth by the Spirit is just as important as physical birth. Consequently, tying the two concepts together saying that both are necessary is a perfectly sensible statement to make. Likewise, as verse 4 and 6 indicate, Jesus’ reference to our physical birth from our parents helps communicate to Nicodemus the nature and kind of process or event he has in mind when he speaks about being born of spirit. For all these reasons it seems difficult to dismiss the possibility that verse 5 contains a reference to our physical births on the grounds that such a reference would be superfluous.

Fourth, concerning the issue of whether a modern concept is being superimposed, there is a bit of a straw man argument occurring. The issue is not whether the actual modern phrase “a woman’s water broke” was known to first-century Jews. The issue is much simpler. Had ancient cultures noticed the issuing of a watery fluid at the time of a child’s birth and did they associate that phenomenon with birth? Whether they knew our modern expression specifically is unnecessary to the argument and cannot be a criterion for dismissing physical birth from John 3:5.

As it turns out, there is at least some evidence that the ancient Jews had already made this association of birth and water by the time of the first century. We find indications in the Bible itself. Job 38:8 states, “Or *who* shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, *as if* it had issued out of the womb?” Notice that the essential idea here is to describe the breaking forth of sea water as if it had issued from the womb. And Job 38 is not alone. 1 John 5:6-11 parallels John 3’s reference to both spiritual birth and physical birth. But it also describes Jesus’ own “coming” in verse 6 saying, “he that came by water and blood, *even* Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood.” The likelihood that this “coming” refers to Jesus’

birth is increased by the fact that verse 1 of this same chapter refers to the begetting of Jesus Christ. Likewise, just one chapter earlier, 1 John 4:2-3 is emphasizing that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. The inclusion of “blood” as proof of Jesus humanity is also indicative that this is a reference to the incarnation. For example, Hebrews 2:14 underscores Jesus’ humanity, saying, “Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same.” Here we see that it was necessary for Jesus to have blood. In light of Hebrews 2, it would make sense for 1 John 5 to cite Jesus’ blood as proof that he came in the flesh, came as a man. Consequently, this passage would not only attest directly to association between physical birth and the issuing of water from the mother, but because this passage is also written by John it further corroborates that John 3:5 could certainly have in mind the same connection between water and physical birth.

We also find some corroboration that ancient Christians understood the close association between water and physical birth. Irenaeus is an early Christian who lives and writes between around 120-203 AD. He was discipled by Polycarp who was actually discipled by the Apostle John. Below is a quote from Irenaeus on the topic of the incarnation.

“3. But, according to these men, neither was **the Word made flesh**, nor Christ, nor the Saviour (Soter), who was produced from [the joint contributions of] all [the Aeons]... **Some, however, make the assertion, that this dispensational Jesus did become incarnate, and suffered, whom they represent as having passed through Mary just as water through a tube**... But according to the opinion of no one of the heretics was **the Word of God made flesh**.” – Irenaeus, Book III, CHAP. XI

Here in Book III, chapter XI of his mammoth work “Against Heresies,” Irenaeus begins by describing one heretical group who denied Jesus was “made flesh.” Irenaeus closes with the same theme, saying, “according to the opinion of no one of the heretics was the Word of God made flesh.” This is a theme we have already seen was on John’s mind in his first epistle when he proclaimed that Jesus came by “water and blood.” More to the point, Irenaeus also describes another heretical group which explained the birth of the Word from Mary as though he merely “passed through Mary just as water through a tube.” We don’t want to confuse the point. Irenaeus does not say that water issued forth from Mary at the birth of Jesus. He is making an analogy between birth and water passing through a tube. But given the mechanics of physical birth in which both the baby and the watery amniotic fluid pass through the birth canal, it is nearly impossible to imagine how Irenaeus could have accidentally used such apt imagery of water passing through a channel without being aware of the issuing of water at physical birth.

While these considerations do not absolutely prove that the ancient Jewish people or early Christians associated physical birth with an issuing of water from the mother, they certainly make it impossible to be so dismissive as to suggest that this is strictly a modern concept that would necessarily have been unknown to the ancient world. There is at least a reasonable basis for assuming the ancient Jews

associated water with physical birth. Moreover, since there is reasonable evidence that ancient Jews and Christians understood this association, especially from 1 John 5, it is more than allowable to interpret “born of water” in John 3:5 as yet another reference to physical birth sandwiched between 2 immediately adjacent incontrovertible references to physical birth in verses 4 and 6. It must also be acknowledged that reference to water baptism are far more removed from this chapter of John.

Number four, how is this model substantially any different then McCabe’s conclusion regarding baptism and the grammar of Matthew 3:11? As we noted earlier, McCabe believes the grammar of Matthew 3 leads to the conclusion that, “The baptism that would be performed by Jesus is accomplished by two means: the Holy Spirit and fire, with the preposition *ἐν* embracing both of these elements.” Is it not possible that the begetting in John 3:5 is a single production of a human being who can enter the kingdom accomplished by two elements: human birth and quickening by the Spirit? First, if the baptism with fire is interpreted to refer to the relationship between persecutions as a metaphorical fiery trial and/or God’s eventual purging of the world by literal fire, then even the two elements of Matthew 3:11 are separated by many years and need not be simultaneous. Second, there is still the fact that baptism in water by John the Baptist and the baptism in the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 were separated by years for many disciples. Consequently, if the begetting described in John 3:5 is similarly accomplished by “two elements” (water and the Holy Spirit), then the grammar of John 3:5 cannot demand those elements must occur at the same time. In short, the grammar of John 3:5 does not demand that the element of water must occur at the same time as the element of the Spirit, regardless of how those terms are interpreted. Therefore, the grammar of John 3:5 cannot rule out that our physical births are in view simply on the grounds that our physical births aren’t simultaneous with our quickening by the Holy Spirit.

All of these facts underscore that from the beginning it has always been God’s grand design to beget “many brothers” for Jesus Christ by a process inherently involving both human reproduction and quickening by the Spirit. While it is entirely possible to conceptualize the generation by the Spirit as a “remake” or as a separate occurrence of “begetting” altogether, this is neither the only way nor necessarily the only valid biblical way to conceptualize the “generating” of a complete (fully mature) human being. It is also valid to take a more holistic view in which both our begetting from our parents and our begetting by God’s Spirit are part of the same, overall, singular process by which God makes a human being complete according to his original design intentions from the beginning. And if this is the case, then there is absolutely nothing about the grammar of John 3:5 that would prevent the reference to “water and the Spirit” as a reference to both human birth and quickening by God’s Spirit. Nor, does the grammar of John 3:5 demand that the reference to “water” must be interpreted as a reference to water baptism. The mention of water in John 3:5 could be a reference to human gestation culminating at physical birth when the mother’s “water breaks” or an emphatic, dual reference where both “water” and “wind/spirit” symbolize the

baptism of the Holy Spirit. As we have seen, grammatical considerations are not incompatible with either of these 2 alternatives.

Therefore, John 3:5 cannot be taken as support for the necessity of water baptism. The language of the passage simply doesn't necessitate that anything other than the baptism in the Holy Spirit alone is in view. Either, both "water" and "wind/spirit" refer to the Holy Spirit's work alone without a reference to literal water. Or, "water" can be understood in relation to physical birth. On this point it is worth mentioning that John 1:12-13 likewise makes reference to our being born of God in relation to our being born from our human parents. Since John 3:5 is not so far removed from John 1:12-13 and since they clearly have substantive overlap, it is reasonable to conclude that John 3:5 means that a man cannot enter the kingdom if he is merely born of water, but rather he must be born of water and of the spirit. Such an interpretation would also be supported by John 3:4 and 6 which seek to distinguish between human birth and the regeneration by the Holy Spirit. Likewise, 1 Corinthians 15:47-50 emphasizes that flesh and blood, which we received from human ancestry is not sufficient but we must also receive God's Spirit to enter into the kingdom. (For more information on this point please see out Born Again Study.)