

The Eschatology of Being "Born Again"

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“There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.’

“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you [sing.], unless one [sing.] is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’

“Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’

“Jesus answered, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you [sing.], “You [pl.] must be born again.” The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.’

“Nicodemus answered and said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’

“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Are you [sing.] the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you [sing.], We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you [pl.] do not receive Our witness. If I have told [aorist] you [pl.] earthly things and you [pl.] do not believe [present], how will you [pl.] believe [future] if I tell [aorist] you [pl.] heavenly things? No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.’” (John 3:1-16)

In Protestant circles, the meaning of the first half of John 3 is well known. In this passage, Jesus taught Nicodemus about the necessity of personal regeneration. The subject is thought to be about how individuals are saved. They are “born again” – transformed in the inner man so that those who formerly rebelled against God are now faithful to him (principally by believing in Jesus). Without addressing the whole subject of “inner transformation,” I would like to present a different reading of what Jesus meant by being “born again.” (I think this phrase should really be translated “born from above,” but “re-birth” is hardly an unknown theme in the Bible and what follows will not require choosing between the two translations. It may well be that the double reference is quite intentional.)

I do not think the typical Protestant interpretation of the first half of John 3 does justice to what Jesus said because it contains two errors. The first error relates to whom the passage is addressed. The standard Evangelical view sees this need for regeneration being directed to individuals in general. Instead, I believe that the object of rebirth being spoken of here was the nation of Israel. The second error relates to the subject at hand. I do not think the subject in this passage is the kind of inner transformation that Protestants usually talk about. Jesus was not here giving a timeless description of how an individual is inwardly transformed from one who hates God to one who loves Him. Rather, He was describing the historical fulfillment of specific things promised under the old covenant. He was talking about a transformation from the old covenant order to the new covenant order.

To begin with, we should notice an unusual point of grammar in the text. An individual came to Jesus by night to talk to him, and the whole conversation was between Jesus and this one man. But in verse 7, Jesus shifted from the singular “you” to the plural “you.” “Do not marvel that I said to you [sing.], “You [pl.] must be born again.” This change would have been noticeable to Nicodemus because either the pronouns are

different words (unlike the English word 'you') or the verbs are conjugated differently.

I believe that when we consider who Nicodemus was, the shift in grammar should not seem all that strange. In the quotation, we find that Nicodemus was both a "teacher of Israel" (v. 10) and a "ruler of the Jews" (v. 1). In other words, he was a representative of Israel. Along these lines, the trouble he had with Jesus' words reflected the general unfaithfulness and unbelief within Israel at that time. The unbelief mentioned in verse 12 was Israel's unbelief, and it was ultimately Israel as a nation (not simply individuals qua individuals) that needed to be born again. The text begins with Jesus telling the individual ruler and representative of Israel that he needed to be born again, but this was functionally equivalent (as the plural grammar in verses 7 and 12 show) to Jesus talking about Israel's need for regeneration. So we can understand verse 7 as saying, "Do not marvel that I said to you Nicodemus, 'Israel must be born again.'" And though verse 11 tells us that Jesus was talking to the individual Nicodemus, verse 12 tells us that He was actually talking to and about Israel (all of the 2nd person pronouns in verse 12 are plural).

This identification of the object of rebirth as national Israel becomes quite explicit when we notice that Jesus was not talking about something new. He incredulously asked the teacher, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?" (3:10) Jesus was not only talking about something that Nicodemus should have known from the OT Scriptures, it was something that should have been rather obvious to him. But if we search those Scriptures for references to a rebirth theme, the Spirit's work in general, or a water/Spirit regeneration in particular, we will not find anything that is significantly related to the general, personal, inner transformation of individuals as individuals.

To begin with, we can note that the birth/rebirth theme says almost nothing that can be plausibly connected with the standard Protestant view of being born again. The individual just isn't the subject of that theme. Luke does call Adam the son of God (Luke 3:38) and Solomon was also God's son (II Sam. 7:12-14), but we do not get much beyond those references. And since these two individuals are clearly types of Christ, their exceptional nature should be kept in mind.

On the other hand, there are several important references in the OT to the nation of Israel's birth and rebirth. From Ezekiel, we find that Jerusalem (representative of Israel in general) was originally born pagan (Ezek. 16:1-5). Similarly, the people themselves had a pagan for a father (Deut. 26:5). Indeed if we go back to Israel's beginning, we find the pagan Abram who was from "Ur of the Chaldeans" (Gen. 11:31). But after infant Jerusalem had been thrown out into the open field and was as good as dead, the Lord spoke new life into her and made her thrive (Ezek. 16:5-7). Along the same lines, Israel was no longer the son of pagans by the time he was in Egypt. He was now God's son, His firstborn (Ex. 4:22; Jer. 31:9; Hos. 11:1). Thus, we see the twin themes of resurrection and rebirth. Israel was pagan and as good as dead, but the Lord gave her new birth and new life. Thus, the song of Moses that was taught to Israel (Deut. 32:44-46) proclaimed, "Of the Rock who begot you, you are unmindful, and have forgotten the God who fathered you" (Deut. 32:18). Israel was born pagan, but she was born again by God and for God.

When it comes to the activity of the Spirit in the OT, the same pattern emerges. We do not find any consistent description of the Spirit's activity with respect to individuals that looks like the Protestant view of being born again. In fact, the Spirit's presence under the old covenants was not even universal. The Protestant view sees the arrival and indwelling of the Spirit as central to rebirth (eg., Rom. 8:9; II Cor. 3:17). This is how a generic individual passes from death to life: the Father sends the Spirit to breathe new life into him. But in the OT, very few individuals received the Spirit's special presence and most of them seem to have been indwelt by the Spirit for certain special tasks. These include:

Joseph (Gen. 41:38)
Bezalel (Ex. 31:3)
Moses and the 70 elders (Num. 11:25, 26)
the pagan prophet Balaam (Num. 24:2)
Joshua (Num. 27:18)
Othniel (Judg. 3:10)
Gideon (Judg. 6:34)
Jephthah (Judg. 11:29)
Samson (Judg. 14:6)
Saul (I Sam. 10:6, 10; 11:6), whom the Spirit later departed from (I Sam. 16:14)
David (I Sam. 16:13)
Amasai (I Chr. 12:18)
Azariah (II Chr. 15:1)
Jahaziel (II Chr. 20:14)
Zechariah (II Chr. 24:20)
Ezekiel (Ezek. 2:2)

Daniel (Dan. 4:8, 9)
Micah (Mic. 3:8)
the Lord's prophets (Neh. 9:30; Zech. 7:12)

This list may leave a person or two out but this is pretty much all of those who had personally been given the Spirit in the OT. Thus, Moses wished "that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them" (Num. 11:29). At the time of course, this situation simply had not come to pass. Under the old covenants, the Spirit's activity with respect to individuals was quite limited, specific, and special. This activity was clearly not what Protestants mean when they describe the Spirit-indwelt rebirth of unbelievers into believers. But if the Spirit was not given in the Protestant born again sense to all of those who trusted God and if the rebirth theme focused on the nation of Israel's historical beginning, what specifically was it that Nicodemus should have understood? Jesus spoke of the regenerating work of the Spirit. This was supposed to be an obvious reference to some OT passage/theme/promise, but what?

With the previous discussion of the rebirth theme and the Spirit's work as background, we should have no problem identifying Jesus' words as a reference to the nation of Israel's promised resurrection following its apostasy, judgment, and exile-death. In the 8th century BC, the Northern Kingdom of Samaria was invaded and conquered by Assyria. The northern tribes of Israel had apostatized from the covenant so God carried out the judgment that the Mosaic Law prescribed for such adultery. The Israelites were carried out of the land and foreigners were brought into the land to re-settle it. At the close of the 7th century BC, the same destructive conquest came to the Southern Kingdom of Judah in the form of the Babylonians. The remaining tribes had likewise fallen into unrepentant rebellion, so they received the same judgment. It is this judgment that the prophets described as the destruction and death of Israel.

But God would not leave His people in the grave. Along with the promise of death, the prophets also promised Israel's resurrection. This resurrection would begin with and be initiated by the Lord's chosen Messiah. The Spirit would come upon Him and He would draw both the remnant of Israel and the gentiles to Himself (Is. 11:1-12; 42:1-7). Thus, the Spirit would also be "poured upon [barren Israel] from on high" resulting in new growth and fruitfulness (Is. 32:12-15). The prophet Joel also foretold this Spiritual effusion on Israel with vivid language.

"The LORD will answer and say to His people...

'You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
and praise the name of the LORD your God,
who has dealt wondrously with you;
and My people shall never be put to shame.
Then you shall know that I am in the midst of Israel:
I am the LORD your God
and there is no other.
My people shall never be put to shame.

'And it shall come to pass afterward
that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
your young men shall see visions.
And also on My menservants and on My maidservants
I will pour out My Spirit in those days.
And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth:
blood and fire and pillars of smoke.
The sun shall be turned into darkness,
and the moon into blood,
before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD.
And it shall come to pass
that whoever calls on the name of the LORD
shall be saved.
For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance,
as the LORD has said,
among the remnant whom the LORD calls.'" (Joel 2:19, 26-32)

This leads us to the two OT passages that are the most direct and relevant referents for Jesus' description of the water and Spirit rebirth. They are the only two OT passages that specifically bring together water and the Spirit to describe regeneration, and they record the specific promise of Israel's national rebirth/restoration.

The first passage is from the prophet Isaiah.

“Yet hear me now, O Jacob My servant,
and Israel whom I have chosen.
Thus says the Lord who made you
and formed you from the womb, who will help you:
‘Fear not, O Jacob My servant;
and you, Jeshurun, whom I have chosen.
For I will pour water on him who is thirsty,
and floods on the dry ground;
I will pour My spirit on your descendants,
and My blessing on your offspring;
they will spring up among the grass
like willows by the watercourses.’” (Is. 44:1-4)

The second passage is from the prophet Ezekiel.

“Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “I do not do this for your sake, O house of Israel, but for My holy name’s sake, which you have profaned among the nations wherever you went. And I will sanctify My great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD,” says the Lord GOD, “when I am hallowed in you before their eyes. For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them....”

“Thus says the Lord GOD: “On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will also enable you to dwell in the cities, and the ruins shall be rebuilt. The desolate land shall be tilled instead of lying desolate in the sight of all who pass by. So they will say, ‘This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden; and the wasted, desolate, and ruined cities are now fortified and inhabited.’...”

The hand of the LORD came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones. Then He caused me to pass by them all around, and behold, there were very many in the open valley; and indeed they were very dry. And He said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”

So I answered, “O Lord GOD, You know.”

Again He said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: “Surely I will cause breath [or “spirit” throughout this passage] to enter into you, and you shall live. I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the LORD.’”

So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but there was no breath in them.

Also He said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.’” So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army.

Then He said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, ‘Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!’ Therefore prophesy and say to them, “Thus says the Lord GOD: “Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it,” says the LORD.” (Ezek. 36:22-27, 33-35; 37:1-14)

What the prophets proclaimed here is not a general, timeless description of how the thoughts and desires of individuals get transformed via a personal conversion. This is not a generic picture of an unbeliever who gets converted to trust in God. Rather, it is a promise and prediction of a specific event that would happen to the nation of Israel. Throughout the books of Isaiah and Ezekiel, the prophets presented Israel with the judgments of God. The nation had apostatized from God. But along with this judgment and desolation, God would provide a new birth for the nation.

Isaiah began by calling Israel “Sodom” and “Gomorrah” (1:10). Israel had become one of the pagan nations. God had created the vineyard of Israel but it had brought forth wild grapes and would be destroyed (5:1-7). This would be the death of Israel (9:13-19). But God would deliver Jerusalem with a new exodus (31:4, 5). The people would mourn and desolation would come upon the land until God poured out the Spirit from on high and the wilderness became a fruitful field (32:12-15). This would in fact be the “gospel”: the good news that God would return to Israel and restore her (40:9-11). This new exodus/creation would make the old one pale in comparison (43:16-20). God would pour His water and Spirit upon His people so that they would grow again (Is. 44:1-4), and the mysterious servant “Israel” would bring salvation to the nation of Israel and to the world (49:1-7). This was the gospel of the kingdom of God. The Lord would return to Israel to restore her and to reign (52:1-10). This would all be the work of the Spirit-Indwelt Anointed One who would go to Zion to proclaim the Jubilee of God (Is. 61:1-3).

Likewise, Ezekiel told his contemporaries that God would make Judah’s land more desolate than a wilderness (6:14). The end had come for Judah; she was going to die (7:1-8). God would perform a new Passover. The remnant would be marked on the forehead and passed over, but the rest of Judah – the new Egypt – would be killed (9:3-7) and God would leave His people (10). Samaria had played the adulterous harlot and had therefore received the death penalty at the hands of Assyria (23:5-10). Judah had also played the adulterous harlot, and she would likewise receive the death penalty at the hands of the Babylonians (23:11-25). Both would be stoned and killed (23:44-47). But the desolate land of Israel would be reborn and re-inhabited (36:1-12). God would gather His scattered people back to the land, sprinkle clean water on them to cleanse them, and put a new spirit within them (36:22-28). This would be the resurrection of Israel (37:1-14).

It is true that there was an initial fulfillment of this restoration when the Lord moved Cyrus to proclaim that the Jews could go back to the land and rebuild. After the 70 year Babylonian captivity, the remnant returned from exile and eventually built a new temple. But it was also clear that this restoration period simply did not match the full description of the Messiah-provided restoration that had been given by the prophets. Israel was still under foreign rule, and though the glory of the restoration covenant surpassed the glory of the previous covenants in some ways, it was a far cry from the kind of Spirit-induced resurrection described above. Moreover, though the people were faithful for a time, things eventually went downhill once again. By the time Jesus had arrived, Israel was again unfaithful to God. Things had become so bad in fact that it was not enough for Israel to be under the beastly foreign power of Rome. She was also held captive by the nastiest and most foreign power in existence: Satan and his demons (this is why we see all of the demonic activity in the NT when it was very rare in the OT). The full and ultimate gospel had not yet become a reality, and when Jesus arrived, things were certainly ripe for something to happen.

Now that we have reviewed all of this material, we should have no problem understanding why Jesus was so incredulous with Nicodemus. The birth theme and the Spirit’s work as they are developed in Israel’s story were quite prominent in the OT. Any Jew should have known this story rather well. For a teacher of Israel to be ignorant of this was a bad sign. At any rate, we should see that Jesus was not talking about individuals per se but about Israel as God’s chosen nation. It is of course true that a nation is made up of individuals, but the point here is that the texts focus on and discuss the nation as a whole instead of focusing on individuals. Neither was Jesus giving a general description of a transformation that happens in numerous times and places. Rather, He was talking about a single promised event – the OT gospel promise that God would restore wayward Israel. Jesus told the teacher and ruler of Israel that Israel needed to be reborn of water and the Spirit before she could see or take part in the promised gospel of the kingdom of God.

But if this rebirth of water and Spirit was a specific promise to Israel that had not truly been fulfilled by the time Jesus talked to Nicodemus, do we know if (and if so then when) it occurred? The NT answers this question with a resounding “yes,” for Jesus had come to do this very thing. He was the first in the new era to be anointed with water and the Spirit (Matt. 3:13-17). He was then able to begin His ministry, for:

“The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me,
because He has anointed Me
to preach the gospel to the poor;
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,

to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed;
to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.” (Luke 4:18, 19 quoting Is. 63:1, 2)

And after the Spirit was poured upon Him from on high, He would then be the one to initiate the baptism of the Spirit promised to Israel by the prophets (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8). But this promise had not yet occurred, for these two verses tell us that He “will baptize” (future tense) Israel with the Spirit. This was the necessary order: Christ the first fruits and afterward those whom He anoints. And before the promise could be realized, the Anointed One had to die.

“On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” (John 7:37-39)

The promise of a water/Spirit restoration had not yet come to Israel because Jesus had not yet given His life as the ransom and been resurrected from the dead. (Here again we can see that this is not referring to a generic, timeless transformation of individuals from unbelief to belief but instead to a specific historical event that was to come.) The Messiah needed to die and be reborn before Israel could be reborn.

“If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give [future tense] you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever – the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you....

“These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send [future tense] in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you. (John 14:15-17, 25-26)

“But now I go away to Him who sent Me, and none of you asks Me, ‘Where are You going?’ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.” (John 16:5-7)

Jesus was put to death of course, and His resurrection was His rebirth.

“Men and brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to you the word of this salvation has been sent.... But God raised Him from the dead. He was seen for many days by those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are His witnesses to the people. And we declare to you glad tidings – that promise which was made to the fathers. God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You.’” (Acts 13:26, 30-32 quoting Ps. 2:7).

Thus, Psalm 2 was not referring to the fact that the Son was “begotten of the Father before all worlds” as the Nicene Creed describes the second Person of the Trinity and His eternal generation from the Father. Instead, as the Psalm makes clear, the birth it mentions was the Messiah’s enthronement as King. Jesus was begotten from the dead by the Father and ascended to His right hand to reign. It was this foundational birth from above that then set the stage for the Spirit’s promised work. “Then He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high.’” (Luke 24:46-49)

This is how Luke closed his Gospel account, and interestingly, he opened his “Acts” by describing the same promise.

“And being assembled together with them, [Jesus] commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, ‘which,’ He said, ‘you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’ Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, ‘Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’ And He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come

upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:4-8)

At last, the time had come. Fifty days after Jesus’ glorification, many Jews from all over the Roman Empire were in Jerusalem for Pentecost. “And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind” (Acts 2:2). The Jews “were all filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:4) and began to speak in other languages. Peter then explained that this was the “last days” effusion of the Spirit prophesied by the prophet Joel (Acts 2:14-21 quoting Joel 2:28-32). He then proclaimed that it was the resurrected Jesus who “poured out what you now see and hear” (Acts 2:33). Many were convicted and they asked what they should do. Peter replied that they should “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.” (Acts 2:38, 39)

This was the beginning of the rebirth that was promised by Ezekiel and described by Jesus. God had promised this water/Spirit resurrection of Israel, and on the Pentecost after Jesus’ glorification, He kept His word and began to breathe new life into Israel’s dry bones. The waters of baptism, quickened by the Holy Spirit, begot many faithful Jews into the kingdom of God by uniting them to the King and to His body (cf. Matt. 28:18-20; Rom. 6:3-5; I Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:26, 27). And throughout Acts, we are told of the effects of this event as the Pentecostal rebirth of Israel spread first to many Jews (“the promise is to you [Jews] and to your children”) and then on to the nations as the prophets had foretold (“the promise is to... all who are afar off”, e.g., Acts 10:44-47; 19:2-6).

There is one more important point that should be made about John 3. No one would describe the standard Evangelical doctrine of rebirth as an “earthly thing.” In Protestant circles, being “born again” is clearly a “heavenly thing.” Yet in His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus did in fact call the rebirth an earthly thing. Notice again what verse 12 says. “If I have told [aorist] you earthly things and you do not believe [present], how will you believe [future] if I tell [aorist] you heavenly things?” Nicodemus was in real trouble. If he had been told about earthly things that were easily found in the scriptures and yet did not believe, how would he believe when Jesus told him of heavenly things that were perhaps not so clear in the scriptures? Thus, Jesus had told the teacher of earthly things but He had not yet told him of heavenly things. And what were the “earthly things” that Jesus told Nicodemus about? Up to that point, Jesus had only talked about the rebirth. But how could He refer to such a “spiritual” concept as an “earthly” thing?

I believe this helps to show from another angle that Jesus was not talking about the same thing that Evangelicals talk about when they use “born again” language, but we should notice what happens after verse 12 to fully answer this question. That verse contains the first use of the word ‘heaven’ in the conversation. But then Jesus when on to use the word three times in the very next sentence! “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.” (3:13) He then proceeded to talk about the Son of Man being “lifted up.” When we consider the gratuitous use of the word ‘heaven’ just after Jesus made a distinction between earthly things that had been mentioned and heavenly things that had not yet been mentioned, we should have no trouble seeing verse 13 and following as the “heavenly things.”

I believe that we now have what we need in order to really understand what Jesus was saying. In verses 3-11, Jesus told Nicodemus about “earthly things” – the necessity of Israel’s promised restoration from sin and exile. Beginning in verse 13, He taught the teacher about “heavenly things” – the Son of Man who would die, rise again, and ascend to heaven as the Lord of all.

What we have here is nothing less than a description of the promised new heavens and new earth (Is. 65:17-25). This was the goal of all of the restoration work mentioned throughout Isaiah. Israel and the nations were corrupt, and God would judge and destroy them. This would be a cataclysmic “de-creation” of the world (e.g., Is. 13:9-13; 24:1-6, 17-23; 34:4). But after this “death” of the world, God would bring life from the dead. God’s suffering Servant would bring salvation to Israel and to the world (Is. 42:1-9; 49:1-7; 52:13 – 53:12; 56:1-8). Israel would be reborn and restored, and this would include life for the world. After destroying the old heavens and earth, God would create them anew.

This restoration was what Jesus was talking about. The suffering Servant had come to give His life so that new life would be breathed into Israel and the world. It is the promised new heavens and earth. The heavens are new because a man, the “Son of Man,” now rules over all from heaven. This had never been the case before Jesus took our nature upon Himself, died, and was resurrected and exalted to be the King of kings (Phil. 2:5-11). The earth is new because Israel has been raised from the dead. And as the prophets promised, this new earth includes the ingathering of the nations into the covenant. The new covenant in Jesus is the new heavens and new earth.

Thus, we get the NT language of new creation. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old

things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.” (II Cor. 5:17) “But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the [old] world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation.” (Gal. 6:14, 15) The Jews under the old order had been set apart from the gentiles as a special priestly people, and circumcision was the covenant sign that accomplished this. But Jesus inaugurated the new creation, and in it He created one new man – “a dwelling place for God in the Spirit” – from the previously separated two (Eph. 2:11-22). It is of course true that the new heavens and earth have not been fully consummated. This new creation certainly has not attained its full maturity and development. But it has begun, and Jesus was its creator. He died and rose again so that the old world may die and rise again to something more glorious – the new creation in Him.

Now having said all of this, I would like to conclude with what I am not saying. I am not denying the existence of personal transformation. When someone who formerly hated God comes to love Him, something obviously happened to his “deepest” desires, motivations, etc. The change may have been dramatic (e.g., conversion of a mafia hit man) or not (e.g., the child born into a Christian home who never knows a day when he does not love God) and it may have been sudden (e.g., the “lightning strike” experience) or not, but such transformations do occur. God does convert people who hate Him into people who love Him; He does transform people’s strongest desires.

And in line with what has been said about the spread of Pentecost in Acts, we can see the transformation of individuals today as that which flows from the creation of the new heavens and earth. There is a clear analogy between Israel’s rebirth/resurrection and our own (with both flowing from the foundational resurrection: the resurrection of Jesus). And so the Bible presents discussion of more personal application in passages like Eph. 2:1-6 and I Pet. 1:22, 23.

The new creation order is as follows. During His earthly ministry, Jesus received the Spirit from on high and was subsequently born (“from above”) from the dead. He was resurrected and ascended to heaven to claim His inheritance as Lord of all. He thus became the “firstborn from the dead” (Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5) and the new Adam, the first fruits of the new creation (I Cor. 15:20-22). He then sent the Pentecostal Spirit to breathe new life into Israel. This new life then flowed to the nations as God “in Christ” created one new man from the previous two (Eph. 2:11-22). So Jesus became the firstborn from the dead “among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29 cf. Heb. 12:22, 23). These brethren, the early Church composed of Jews and gentiles, were the first fruits of the new creation (Jas. 1:18). It is this objective shift in the world-order that provides the conceptual theme of rebirth/resurrection that we can then apply to individuals. (E.g., notice the order in Ephesians. Eph. 1:19-23 describes Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. Eph. 2:1-6 then describes our resurrection and ascension.)

But the point of this paper is that in John 3, Jesus was not giving a general description of such individual transformation. Rather, He was describing the specific, historical rebirth that God promised would happen to Israel. Technically speaking, the nation had come back into the land after the Babylonian captivity. But in a real sense, it was still in exile. It was captive to Rome and to the demons, and it was full of unfaithfulness and rebellion. Israel was a nation of dry bones and she needed the cleansing water and life-restoring Spirit in order to enter the kingdom of God, the promised new heavens and earth. This event had not yet occurred when Jesus talked to Nicodemus, and it would not occur until after Jesus – the true Servant and Israel of God – had died and risen to new life. He was the firstborn from the dead, and from that rebirth came Israel’s rebirth and life for the world.