
The Johannine Realism about the Kingdom of God: “Born from Above, Born of Water and Spirit” (John 3:1-21)

Yung Suk Kim

*Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity
Virginia Union University*

There are no parables of Jesus in John’s Gospel and “the kingdom of God” does not seem to be the main topic of the Gospel, as opposed to the Synoptic Gospels. However, an exception is made in John 3:3 and 3:5. Here, Jesus talks about the kingdom of God when Nicodemus, a Pharisee, and a leader of Jews, visits him by night. Nicodemus says to him: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God” (3:2). Jesus answers him: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (3:3). Again, he says: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” Jesus does not talk about the future kingdom of God; rather, his point is that anyone who is born from above and born through water and Spirit, *can* experience God now.

Jesus’ answers to Nicodemus can be also understood from the Johannine community’s perspective that its members can experience the kingdom of God in the present if they are born from above and born of water and Spirit. The present tense verb *dunamai* (“be capable of”) in 3:3 and 3:5 evokes a dash of realism in the here and now. If one is born from above and born through water and Spirit, one *can see/enter* the kingdom of God now. To make this happen, one must accept the light and do what is true (3:21). A mere belief in Jesus is not enough, as Jesus hints at in 8:31-32. To become disciples of Jesus, people must keep the word of Jesus who does the work of God (8:31-32). Likewise, they must follow the way of God (14:6) and the Spirit of truth (14:17; 15:26; 16:13). They are encouraged to speak the truth even before Pilate (18:37).

Given the Johannine community’s expulsion from the synagogue due to its faith that Jesus is the Messiah, it is very important to assure the members of this nascent community about their new place in God.¹ They are comforted and encouraged to live as the children of God. They are taught to be born from above and experience a new life through the Spirit. The Advocate will come to them after Jesus is gone, and God’s reign continues to be seen, touched, and experienced in the here and now. Jesus sends

1. See R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 42-61; J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: WJKP, 2003), 46-66; 145-167.

Jesus does not talk about the future kingdom of God; rather, his point is that anyone who is born from above and born through water and Spirit, *can* experience God now.

his disciples into the world so that they may continue to testify to the truth of God.

“Born from Above, Born of Water and Spirit” (3:3, 5)

Jesus says: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born *from above*” (3:3, NRSV). The Greek adverb *anōthen* has the double meaning of “again” and “from above.” Nicodemus misunderstands Jesus and perceives this adverb in a literal, physical sense. So, he answers: “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” (3:4). He asks this way because he has no idea about spiritual birth that may be born anew or from above. In what sense does Jesus use this adverb? Does he mean either “born again” or “born from above”?² The former emphasizes the temporal sense of birth just as Nicodemus thinks in a physical sense. According to this understanding, the emphasis is on the day of a new birth.³ But overall, in John’s Gospel, what is emphasized is not when one is born but how one is born. That is, the point is new life comes from God or above. The source of new life is God or the Spirit. *Anōthen* is also used in the sense of

2. The NIV translates John 3:3 as follows: “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” Here the notion is a temporal birth, once and for all.

3. The similar idea of “spiritual birth” is implied in the work of Raymond Brown who separates spiritual birth from physical birth. The former comes from “the heavenly Father through the Son whom he has empowered to give life.” In this thought, spiritual birth or eternal life is opposed to physical birth or physical life on earth. See Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), 138.

“above” in 3:31⁴: “The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all.” In this verse, the point is Jesus comes from above and he embodies the word of God through his teaching and ministry. He testifies about God who is above and the source of life, as 3:32-36 reads:

³² He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. ³³ Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. ³⁴ He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. ³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath.

Likewise, those who accept the word of God that Jesus teaches and embodies can live a new life in God. They are born from above.⁵ “To be born from above” means one is born from God, which means to live according to God. Jesus shows the way of new life or new birth, which is not a one-time birth, but an ongoing life that needs a connection with God or the Spirit.

But because Nicodemus does not understand his point, Jesus says again and explains the birth from above: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being *born of water and Spirit*” (John 3:5). “Born of water” evokes the image of water baptism rather than physical birth.⁶ If the latter is in view, we can hardly explain why two different births are needed to enter the kingdom of God. People repent and come to be baptized with water. Baptism means surrender to God and a new determination to live a new life. But “born of water” is more than water baptism. Whereas the latter occurs one time, the former means one yields to God continuously. That is, one’s new spiritual birth is not complete with one action of water baptism.

“Born of Spirit” means the Spirit-led life. One must seek heavenly things in the sense that one must live by the Spirit. Jesus comes from above, the Spirit, and is not controlled by earthly things, as John 3:31 says: “The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all.” The phrase “earthly things” is not understood in a dualistic sense that devalues the body or earth. The point is how one can live by the Spirit, not seeking only earthly things. God is spirit

4. See also John 19:11 where *another* appears in a similar sense of “above.” In John 8:23 there is a different adverb, *ano*, which also means “above.”

5. D. Moody Smith, *John* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 95.

6. Water may signify physical birth while Spirit connotes spiritual birth. But the question is why one needs two kinds of births to enter the kingdom of God. It seems that water symbolizes water baptism. In John 3:22, Jesus is said to baptize other people. This implies that he knows the importance of water baptism because it is a gesture of one’s full submission to God. See Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 56. See also D. Moody Smith, *John* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 95.

“**B**orn of water” evokes the image of water baptism rather than physical birth. . . Baptism means surrender to God and a new determination to live a new life. But “born of water” is more than water baptism. Whereas the latter occurs one time, the former means one yields to God continuously. That is, one’s new spiritual birth is not complete with one action of water baptism.

and people must worship him in spirit and truth (John 4:24). The Spirit-led life is to participate in Jesus’ life, as he says in 6:53-58:

⁵³ So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; ⁵⁵ for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

The Spirit is also important to the Johannine community. In John 14, Jesus comforts his disciples with the assurance that the Spirit of truth will come to guide them after he is gone (14:17; 15:26). They will not be orphaned because the Advocate will come to help them (14:26). The risen Jesus breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:22).

Doing what is true (3:21)

A person born from above must maintain his/her life by remaining in the light, doing what is true. If there is no light in one’s life, in a community or society, darkness will roll in to take the space. So, a “spiritual” person cannot hide in a spiritual den that does not deal with worldly matters. One must engage in the world by doing what is true and hating evil, as Jesus says in 3:20-21: “For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be seen that their deeds have been done in God.” There is no gray area between truth and evil. Those

who do evil hate the light because they have an abiding fear about their behavior. Those who do what is true, which means doing according to the Spirit or God, come to the light and celebrate it. Likewise, those who do what is true are not afraid of their deeds because they stay in the light.

Since in the Johannine worldview, the world is full of darkness and humans hate the light, there must be a special intervention from God. To get out of this world of darkness, they must embrace the light that God provides through Jesus' life. This idea is stated in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Here, to believe in him means to accept his teaching and keep his word, which has to do with the embodiment of God's love. Since Jesus came to the world as light and testified about God, people must accept him and keep his word.

Keeping the word of Jesus (8:31-32)

Jesus speaks to “the Jews who had believed in him” (8:31). Like Nicodemus, they knew that Jesus came from God and acknowledged his power. But they did not continue in the word of Jesus. They were not born from above yet because they do not keep the word of Jesus who testifies about God. Jesus says to them in 8:32: “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” A mere belief in, or knowledge about Jesus, is not enough. To be born from above, one needs to keep Jesus' teaching because he shows the way of God. His teaching is centered on God's love, light, and life. They must learn from Jesus to embody God's love for the world. Jesus was devoted to doing the will of God who sent him to do this work of God (4:34). Jesus' followers must participate in his work of God, which is to bring about life and light to the world. In his theology, Jesus considers his flesh and blood as the cost for doing the work of God. He invites others to do the same: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink” (6:54-55).

Jesus' disciples are not made once and for all. Only if they keep the word of Jesus, they are his disciples. A person born from above or born through water and Spirit must follow Jesus. Who can see or enter the kingdom of God? The answer is those who continue to keep the word of Jesus. When they keep Jesus' word, they *will know the truth* (the future tense), which underscores the importance of continual discipleship. If they do not follow Jesus, they are not in the truth of God. When they engage the truth audaciously, they will not be afraid of anyone or anything. Instead, they will be free from worldly powers and deceptions because God assures them about their place in the kingdom of God.

Embodying the “I Am” sayings of Jesus

In John's Gospel there are seven “I am” sayings of Jesus:

1. I am the bread of life (6:35-48);
2. I am the light of the world (8:12; 9:5);

“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” A mere belief in, or knowledge about Jesus, is not enough. To be born from above, one needs to keep Jesus' teaching because he shows the way of God. His teaching is centered on God's love, light, and life.

3. I am the gate (10:7);
4. I am the good shepherd (10:11-14);
5. I am the resurrection and the life (11:25);
6. I am the way, the truth and the life (14:6);
7. I am the true vine (15:1-5).

Instead of seeing Jesus' special identity in these sayings, we can view them as metaphorical statements about his work. When Jesus says, “I am the bread of life,” the point is he feeds and nourishes hungry people through his work of God, as he says in 4:32: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.” He is not the bread, literally, but his work of God enables others to live with God's assurance about their life in the present and future. He also asks others to follow the example of his sacrificial life, as in 6:51: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Eating his flesh is not literal but means to participate in his life-giving work. When one does so, the kingdom of God is realized in the present through his/her community. Likewise, when Jesus says, “I am the light of the world,” he does not mean he is a God or the light, literally. One must look at his work of light that gives hope to those who are downtrodden and despondent. He helps the blind man and restores his sight (John 9). As light expels darkness, those who follow Jesus and stay in the light must participate in liberating people from their enslaving conditions. In John 9, those who see with their eyes do not see the work of God happening to the man born blind. This is because the village people and Jewish leaders have overconfidence about their eyesight.

Likewise, Jesus as “the gate” protects his people and keeps them safe. Similarly, Jesus as “the good shepherd” leads his people to green pastures and is ready to die to protect them. Jesus is “the resurrection and the life” because he empowers people to live with hope in God. The present reality of resurrection life is possible through Jesus who does the work of God. Jesus is “the way, the

truth, and the life” in the present because he shows the way of God, embodies the truth, and realizes the life in the kingdom of God through his life. Jesus is “the true vine” in the sense that he does the work of God as the Son of God. He never says in John’s Gospel that he is God. He always makes sure that he does the work of God. His disciples should follow him, doing his work of God.

The Johannine community’s birth from above

Thus far we have seen the Johannine language of a birth metaphor, the realism of light and darkness, the importance of faith and discipleship, and the alternative understanding of the “I am” sayings of Jesus. When all these are taken together, the point is a person can be born from above, which means God is the source of life. This birth requires repentance and submission to God, which is conveyed in water baptism. When one submits to God, one is renewed through the Spirit. From the Johannine community’s perspective, this kind of birth means to accept and follow Jesus, who is sent by God, does the will of God (4:34), and shows the way of God (14:6).⁷ One must do what is true and testify to the truth as Jesus does (c.f., 18:37). In that way, one stays in the light, and that is the sphere of God’s reign. When one lives by the faith of Christ, that is, by keeping his word, one becomes truly his disciple (8:31-32). As one continues to live by Jesus’ faithfulness, one will know the truth (the future tense) and will be free. One’s freedom is not complete once and for all. It will be experienced when one participates in the work of the truth through Jesus. Likewise, the “I am” sayings of Jesus can be understood as the description of his work, which must be followed by his followers.

Now all the above work of Jesus applies to the Johannine community—a small-knit, expelled, Jewish-Christian community in confrontation with the Jewish synagogue, as is reflected in the narrative (9:22; 12:42; c.f., 16:2; 18:20). Some of the early followers of Jesus were part of the synagogue and believed that Jesus was the Messiah. They shared this faith with other members of the synagogue, but their evangelism was not accepted. Eventually, they were banned and expelled from the community, as the story of a blind man reflects (9:22). This is the crisis moment that they had to deal with. Once they were separated from the synagogue, they had to find themselves comfortable and confident about their new theological position. So much of Johannine theology is centered on comforting them and assuring them about the superior position of their community. So it is understandable why John’s Gospel includes dualistic expressions about light and darkness (8:12; 12:46), ultimatum expressions about children of God (8:39-44), and high Christological claims (1:1-18; 2:19; 6:39-54).⁸ In all of

One’s freedom is not complete once and for all. It will be experienced when one participates in the work of the truth through Jesus. Likewise, the “I am” sayings of Jesus can be understood as the description of his work, which must be followed by his followers.

these, the point is that the members of the Johannine community are beloved, true children of God through Jesus, his Son. In this sense, the kingdom of God as God’s reign is partially realized in this small, struggling community of early Christians. As Jesus comforts his disciples before he departs (John 14:1-6), the members of the Johannine community hear him speaking the same thing to them. They will not be orphaned or abandoned because the Advocate will come to help them (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7).

But on the other hand, Johannine theology develops into a more engaging nature, opening the door toward others. The members of the community are encouraged to love the world, which is currently occupied by evil and darkness. The love of the world is a mandate for them because God so loved it (3:16). At his farewell speech in John 17:15, Jesus prays to the Father and wants the disciples to do his remaining work: “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.” If Jesus had been a dualistic thinker, he would have prayed for something like this: “I am asking you to take them out of the world as soon as possible because they are suffering too much.” But his prayer is that God protects them from the evil one. This means they must continue the work of Jesus in the world. In John, the world is an ambiguous place: the place of evil and the place for God’s love. Jesus was sent into *this* world to throw light into the darkness. But he was rejected by the world and thrown into the darkness instead. But God raised him and glorified him. What Jesus did is clear: he let the light shine on the world, testifying about the truth of God. Before he returns to God, he prays to the Father: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (17:17-18).

As seen above, the Johannine community is urged to overcome the logic of “us/them,” by genuinely practicing the love of God for the world and keeping the word of Jesus who embodied God’s love in a harsh world. The Advocate will come to the community after Jesus is gone and help it, as he says: “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (14:26). This means the Johannine community must continue to follow all that Jesus taught. He also says that the Advocate, which

7. In John’s Gospel, Jesus is compared to Moses who is sent by God to deliver his people from Egypt. Like Moses, he is sent to the world to deliver the word of God so that people may live a life of truth, freedom, and transformation. See also Paul Anderson, “The Having-Sent-Me Father: Aspects of Agency, Encounter, and Irony in the Johannine Father-Son Relationship,” *Semeia* 85 (1999): 33-57.

8. Regarding Johannine dualism, see Paul N. Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel: An Introduction to John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 36-38.

is the Spirit of truth, will testify on his behalf: “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf” (15:26). If the members of the community correctly understand the love of God, Jesus’ embodiment of God’s love, and the work of the Advocate, they will comprise a transformative community of love and engage in the world, as Jesus did. In the end, the Johannine community will be born anew and from above—from the God of love (3:16)—through the Spirit (3:5) and Jesus’ work of God (4:34). This community will not stay in the comfort zone of the sacred canopy; rather, it will seek to follow Jesus, the deliver and interpreter of the *logos* of God (17:6, 14, 17).

In John, the world is an ambiguous place: the place of evil and the place for God’s love. Jesus was sent into *this* world to throw light into the darkness. But he was rejected by the world and thrown into the darkness instead. But God raised him and glorified him.
