

Jesus and Nicodemus: "Born of Water and the Spirit"

John 3:1-21 | Who Was Nicodemus? What Does "Born Again" Mean? What Do Scholars Say? | A Deep Dive Study

THE PASSAGE: JOHN 3:1-8

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. **2** 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."

3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

4 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?"

5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. **6** That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. **7** Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' **8** The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

WHO WAS NICODEMUS?

A Pharisee:

- Member of a strict Jewish sect (~6,000 in 1st century)
- "Separated ones" — devoted to Law of Moses
- Experts in oral tradition and Torah interpretation
- Believed in resurrection, angels, afterlife (unlike Sadducees)

A Ruler of the Jews:

- Member of the **Sanhedrin** — Jewish "Supreme Court"
- 70-member council that governed Jewish affairs
- Combined religious, judicial, and political authority
- Jesus calls him "THE teacher of Israel" (John 3:10) — possibly a title indicating his prominence

Think of Nicodemus as: A Supreme Court Justice + Harvard Professor + Senior Pastor all in one. He was the religious establishment. Yet Jesus tells him he still needs to be "born again."

Why Did He Come at Night?

Theories:

- **Fear:** Didn't want other Pharisees to know
- **Privacy:** Wanted uninterrupted conversation
- **Symbolism:** John uses light/darkness imagery — Nicodemus in spiritual "darkness"
- **Practicality:** Jesus was busy during the day

John emphasizes "by night" three times (3:2, 7:50, 19:39) — likely symbolic

WHAT DOES "BORN AGAIN" MEAN?

Greek: "gennao anothēn"

- **anōthen** = "from above" OR "again/another"
- Double meaning intentional — birth from heaven
- Nicodemus takes it literally: "Re-enter womb?"
- Jesus means: **spiritual rebirth from God**

Jesus' Challenge to Nicodemus:

- You can't enter God's kingdom by:
- ✗ Being Jewish by birth
 - ✗ Keeping religious traditions
 - ✗ Your position or status
 - ✗ Your theological knowledge

You need: **A completely new spiritual origin** — being "born from above"

"BORN OF WATER AND SPIRIT"

The Six Major Scholarly Interpretations

1. BAPTISM (Sacramental View)

- Water = Christian water baptism
- Spirit = receiving Holy Spirit
- **Held by:** Catholics, Orthodox, many Protestants, LDS
- **Support:** Early Church Fathers unanimous on this
- **Objection:** Christian baptism didn't exist yet — how could Nicodemus understand it?
- **Response:** John the Baptist WAS baptizing — Nicodemus knew of it (John 1:25, 33)

2. NATURAL BIRTH vs. SPIRITUAL BIRTH

- Water = amniotic fluid (physical birth)
- Spirit = spiritual birth
- **Held by:** Many evangelicals (MacArthur, etc.)
- **Support:** Parallels v. 6: "born of flesh... born of Spirit"
- **Objection:** No evidence ancients described birth as "water"; seems redundant

3. EZEKIEL 36 PROPHECY (Most Scholars)

- Water + Spirit = single concept from Old Testament
- References **Ezekiel 36:25-27**:

"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean... I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you... I will put my Spirit within you."

- **Held by:** D.A. Carson, many Reformed scholars
- **Support:** Jesus expected Nicodemus to know this (v.10)
- Water = cleansing; Spirit = transformation

4. JOHN THE BAPTIST'S BAPTISM

- Water = John's baptism of repentance
- Spirit = the greater baptism John promised
- **Support:** John 1:33 — "He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit"
- Context: John was baptizing nearby (John 3:23)

5. THE WORD OF GOD

- Water = Scripture/God's Word
- Based on Ephesians 5:26: "washing of water with the word"
- 1 Peter 1:23: "born again... through the living word of God"
- **Less common view**

6. HENDIADYS (One Concept)

- "Water and Spirit" = one thing, not two
- Like "fire and brimstone" = one judgment
- Meaning: "spiritual water" or "cleansing Spirit"
- Greek grammar supports single preposition governing both

WHAT EARLY CHURCH FATHERS SAID

UNANIMOUS: "Born of water" = Baptism

Justin Martyr (c. 150 AD):

"They are brought by us where there is water and are regenerated... For Christ said, 'Unless you be born again, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.'"

Irenaeus (c. 180 AD):

"We are made clean by means of the **sacred water**... being spiritually regenerated as new-born babes, even as the Lord declared: 'Except a man be born again through water and the Spirit...'"

Tertullian (c. 200 AD):

"Without baptism, salvation is attainable by none, chiefly on the ground of that declaration of the Lord, who says, '**Unless one be born of water, he has not life.**'"

Cyprian (c. 250 AD):

"If any man does not receive baptism, he does not have salvation."

Augustine (c. 400 AD):

"Without baptism and participation at the table of the Lord it is impossible for any man to attain either to the kingdom of God or to salvation."

Scholarly Note: Despite searching, scholars have been unable to find ANY Church Father who denied that John 3:5 referred to baptism. This was the **unanimous understanding** for the first 1,500 years of Christianity.

THE LDS UNDERSTANDING

Water = Baptism by immersion
Spirit = Confirmation/Gift of the Holy Ghost

2 Nephi 31:5:

"If the Lamb of God, he being holy, should have need to be **baptized by water**, to fulfil all righteousness, O then, how much more need have we, being unholy, to be baptized."

3 Nephi 11:33-34:

"Whoso believeth in me, and is **baptized**, the same shall be saved... And whoso believeth not in me, and is not baptized, shall be damned."

D&C 20:37:

"All those who humble themselves... and truly manifest by their works that they have received of the Spirit of Christ unto the remission of their sins, shall be received by **baptism** into his church."

Moses 6:59:

"By reason of transgression cometh the fall, which fall bringeth death, and inasmuch as ye were born into the world by **water, and blood, and the spirit**, which I have made, and so became of dust a living soul, even so ye must be **born again** into the kingdom of heaven, of **water, and of the Spirit**, and be cleansed by blood."

Two Ordinances:

1. **Baptism by water** — for remission of sins
2. **Confirmation** — receiving the Holy Ghost

Articles of Faith 1:4:

"The first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance; third, **Baptism by immersion** for the remission of sins; fourth, Laying on of hands for the **gift of the Holy Ghost.**"

NICODEMUS: THE REST OF HIS STORY

THREE APPEARANCES IN JOHN:

1. John 3 — The Night Visit

- Comes secretly to learn from Jesus
- Receives "born again" teaching
- Seems confused but interested

2. John 7:50-52 — Defends Jesus

- Sanhedrin wants to arrest Jesus
- Nicodemus speaks up: "Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him?"
- Pharisees mock him: "Are YOU from Galilee too?"
- **Moving from darkness toward light**

3. John 19:38-42 — Buries Jesus

- After crucifixion, comes openly
- Brings 75-100 lbs of myrrh and aloes
- **Royal burial** — extraordinary expense
- Joins Joseph of Arimathea
- **Both defiled themselves** during Passover
- **Finally steps into the light**

Nicodemus' Journey:

Night (secret) → Defense (public) → Burial (open devotion)

From **darkness to light** — John's recurring theme

WHAT HAPPENED TO NICODEMUS LATER?

According to Later Tradition:

- **Baptized by Peter and John** (Gospel of Nicodemus)
- **Cast out of Sanhedrin** for Christian sympathies
- **Banished from Jerusalem** by hostile Jews
- Lived with **Gamaliel** (another Sanhedrin member)
- **Martyred** for his faith
- Buried near **Stephen** (first Christian martyr)

Note: These are from apocryphal sources (Gospel of Nicodemus, Acts of Pilate) — not Scripture, but reveal early Christian tradition.

Venerated as a Saint:

- Feast Day: **August 31** (with Joseph of Arimathea)
- Honored in Catholic, Orthodox, and Oriental traditions
- Symbol: jar of myrrh/aloes
- Called "Defender of Jesus" for his Sanhedrin speech

SUMMARY: SCHOLARLY CONSENSUS

View	Held By	Strength
Baptism	Catholics, Orthodox, LDS, Early Fathers	Unanimous patristic support
Ezekiel 36	Reformed scholars (Carson, etc.)	OT background; Jesus expected Nicodemus to know
Natural birth	Some evangelicals	Parallels "flesh/spirit" in v.6
John's baptism	Various scholars	Contextually relevant (John 1:33, 3:23)

Most scholars agree:

1. Jesus is teaching about **spiritual transformation**
2. The Old Testament provides the background (Ezekiel 36)
3. Water and Spirit together = **cleansing + new life**
4. Early Christians universally understood this as **baptism**
5. The passage challenges **relying on religious heritage** instead of spiritual rebirth

KEY TAKEAWAYS

For LDS:

- ✓ Jesus taught baptism is **essential** — "cannot enter"
- ✓ Water AND Spirit — **two parts** to being born again
- ✓ Early Church unanimously agreed on baptism interpretation
- ✓ Nicodemus likely was baptized later (tradition)
- ✓ Religious knowledge alone isn't enough — need **ordinances**

When Protestants say "baptism is just symbolic":

- Jesus said you CANNOT enter without water + Spirit
- No Church Father denied baptism was meant
- Even Ezekiel 36 view includes water for cleansing
- Natural birth view is the weakest scholarly position

John 3:16-17:

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved."

Nicodemus' story shows:

- Even the most learned, religious person needs to be **born again**. It's never too late to step from darkness into light.