

What Nicodemus Should Have Known *Rediscovering the New Birth in the Old Testament*

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Shepherds' Conference, March 2014

When Jesus spoke with Nicodemus about being born again, He said, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?” (John 3:10, NASU). Jesus’ question to Nicodemus indicates that He considered the topic something that the Old Testament had already revealed. Preacher, are you a teacher in the church of Jesus Christ and do not yet understand the teachings of the Old Testament concerning the new birth? Most theologians turn to Ezekiel 36:26–27 to find the new birth in the Old Testament, even though it does not use the terms “born” or “birth.” An Old Testament text exists, however, that is much clearer and that makes connections to other texts in both the Old and the New Testaments to provide a substantial doctrine of regeneration. The exposition of that text addresses topics such as “Mother Zion” (Gal 4:26), not all Israel being Israel (Rom 9:6), the “new heart” (Ezek 36:26–27), and a divine registry of the names of true believers (Dan 12:1). The Old Testament textual unit forms the centerpiece of biblical revelation which Nicodemus apparently ignored, resulting in Jesus rebuking him.

Conversion in the Old Testament

See the following: William D. Barrick, “Living a New Life: Old Testament Teaching About Conversion,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 19–38.
<http://www.tms.edu/JournalIssue.aspx?year=2000>

- Conversion implies breaking away from a former manner of living.
- No conversion without abandoning sin.
- Conversion comes by divine intervention.
- Mosaic description of conversion:
 - ✓ Deuteronomy 6:4–5
 - ✓ Deuteronomy 10:12–21
 - ✓ Deuteronomy 30:6
- Circumcision of the heart (Deut 10:16 and 30:6) “speaks of internal identification with [the Lord] in what might be called regeneration in Christian theology.” — Eugene Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 388
- Paul used the same imagery to define the spiritual Jew in Romans 2:28–29.
- The apostle also attributes the renewal to the work of the Holy Spirit (cf. Ezek 36:25–27).
- Jeremiah relates the renewal to the New Covenant (Jer 31:31–34).

- Covenant renewal in the OT consisted of recommitment to the changed life that had been entered at conversion.
- “Commitment . . . begins with the experience of conversion and then follows through into a life of progressive sanctification in obedience to God’s law.” — J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 297

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- Narrative descriptions of conversion:
 - ✓ Abram (Gen 12; Rom 4:1–12; Gal 3:7–9)
 - ✓ Rahab (Josh 2)
 - ✓ Ruth (Ruth 1:16–18)
 - ✓ Naaman (2 Kgs 5)
 - ✓ Sailors aboard Jonah’s ship (Jon 1:16)
 - ✓ Ninevites (Jon 3:5–10)
- Instrumentality: God’s Word (Ps 19:7; cp. 2 Tim 3:15)
- Repentance (Jon 3:5)
- Results:
 - ✓ Confession of Yahweh’s sovereignty (Josh 2:11; 2 Kgs 5:15)
 - ✓ Forgiveness of sins (2 Kgs 5:18)
 - ✓ Total change of life (2 Kgs 5:15; Jon 3:8; Heb 11:8)
 - ✓ New relationship to God

Introduction to Psalm 87:

- Psalm 87 picks up the prophecy of 86:9. All nations will come and worship the Lord.
- Psalm 87 interprets Psalms 46 and 48 (also by “the sons of Korah”).
 - ✓ The sons of Korah are descendants of Korah who rebelled against Moses. God caused the ground to open up and swallow Korah, his fellow rebels, and their families—250 people (Numbers 16).
 - ✓ However, Numbers 26:11 reveals that the sons of Korah did not die with him. God saw that they did not or would not participate in their father’s rebellion.
 - ✓ He spared them by His grace. They experienced God’s grace and continued to testify of His grace throughout all their following generations.
 - ✓ David appointed those descendants to the ministry of song in the Tabernacle and Temple.
 - ✓ Those who wrote this psalm were that remnant of grace.

Psalm 46 declares that the LORD of hosts will be exalted among the nations (vv. 10–11).

Psalm 48 declares that Zion is the city of the Great King, the city of the LORD of hosts, the city of our God.

- I. Zion’s Sovereign Selection (vv. 1-3)
 - A. Divine Sanctification: Holy Foundation (v. 1)
 - ▶ “Holy” means to be completely different (or, without rival) and without sin.
 - ▶ God established Jerusalem (Zion) as His city.
 - B. Divine Selection: Great Love (v. 2)

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- ▶ Writings by the ancient Jewish rabbis ask a question: “A king has a palace in every province, but which palace is best loved by him?” Their answer is: “The palace which is in his own province.”
- ▶ The ark of the covenant had several dwelling places: Gilgal, Shiloh, Nob, Gibeon, and Beth Shemesh. The place that God loves best is the one He led David to establish as the dwelling place of the ark—Jerusalem.
- ▶ It is not the most beautiful place in all Israel—Mt. Hermon is higher and more beautiful.
- ▶ It is not the most defensible place in all Israel—the top of Mt. Tabor might be more defensible.
- ▶ But, it was the place God chose. A place where Israel would need to trust Him as their defense.

Isaiah 31:5

Isaiah 37:35

C. Divine Statements: Glorious Words (v. 3)

- ▶ The text does not tell us who spoke these words. Were they spoken by men, angels, or God? The implication is that it is God Himself who spoke these words.

Psalms 48:1-2

- ▶ It is not the people, the city, or the nation who chooses God. God chooses them.

Deuteronomy 7:6-8

Deuteronomy 9:4-6

II. Zion’s Selected Citizens (vv. 4-6)

A. Designation of Foreigners as Citizens (v. 4)

- ▶ All of the major people in the region are included in these examples or representatives. Rahab is Egypt.

Isaiah 30:7

- ▶ “the chief lesson that emerges from the psalm is that Zion is the birthplace of all those who come to it to serve God there, even if they are non-Jews and even if they come from very far-off lands.” — Amos Hakham, *Psalms with The Jerusalem Commentary*, Koschitzky edition, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 2003), 2:300

B. Divine Registry of Citizens (vv. 5-6)

- ▶ An ancient Greek translation of verse 5 translates “Zion” as “Mother Zion.”

Galatians 4:26

Hebrews 12:22-24

- ▶ Other passages of the Old Testament speak of the multiplication of believers:

Isaiah 54:1-5

- ▶ The text speaks of a dual citizenship—being citizens of both earth and Heaven—being born physically and being born spiritually. Notice the repetition of “This one was born there” (vv. 4 and 6). Pay attention to the difference in verse 5, speaking of those who dwell in Jerusalem: “This one and that one were born in her.” Not all Israel are Israel.

Romans 9:6

- ▶ The text speaks of a supernatural (or spiritual) birth just like Ezekiel 36:26-27; John 3:10 and 4:19-24.

John 3:1-10

- ▶ The Old Testament speaks of names written in a book or registry:

Daniel 12:1**Isaiah 4:3-5**

- ▶ One Jewish commentator writes: “the chief lesson that emerges from this psalm is that Zion is the birthplace of all those who come to it to serve God there, even if they are no-Jews and if they come from very far-off lands.”

III. Zion’s Celebrating Citizens (v. 7)

- ▶ **“All my springs of joy are in you”**—some translations add “*of joy*” because of the context. The “springs” might represent the source of all that is essential for a life centered in God—a life abounding in all the good things that God gives.
 - ✓ “Just as natural springs were essential for the life of many a village and town, so Jerusalem, the city of God, is here being depicted as the source of all that is essential to the God-centered life, a life bubbling over with all the good things that God gives.” — Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 288–89
- ▶ **“Play the flutes”** in some translations becomes “dance” in other translations. See the musical heading on Psalm 88:
 - Psalm 88:Heading**
 - ▶ “Mahalath Leannoth” means “to be sung with a dance” or “to reply with a dance.”
 - ▶ Psalm 88 is a very gloomy psalm. This heading does not fit it. The psalm headings are very ancient and misunderstood. Some of the words from the ancient Hebrew are just transliterated (converted into English letters without translating)—like “Mahalath Leannoth.”

When we compare the psalm headings with Habakkuk 3, we find that the musical parts of the headings should be at the end of the previous psalm and the authorship and historical portion should belong to the following psalm.

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Habakkuk 3:1 A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth. . . .¹⁹

The Lord GOD is my strength, And He has made my feet like hinds' *feet*, And makes me walk on my high places. For the choir director, on my stringed instruments. Therefore, this musical portion currently at the beginning of Psalm 88 actually belongs at the end of Psalm 87. When it is placed there, it all makes sense. Psalm 87 is one of the most joyous psalms because it celebrates the new birth.

Conclusion:

- Salvation is for those who are “born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13).

We all have two births that are possible: first, our physical birth from our mothers, and second, our spiritual birth. When we believe the good news concerning Jesus Christ, we are born again by the Spirit of God. I am a citizen of the United States by physical birth. You are (or, can become) citizens of Zion by being born again. All of us who have been born again by the Spirit of God are counted by God as citizens of Zion. Whether we were born in Egypt, Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, Ethiopia, Russia, the Ukraine, America, Brazil, France, China, or any other nation, we can be citizens of Zion—we can be written in the Lamb’s Book of Life as citizens of Zion.

Hebrews 12:22-24²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels,²³ to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of *the* righteous made perfect,²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than *the blood* of Abel.