

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 330

The Exodus and John 3:5

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Teacher: Dr. Michael S. Heiser (MH)

Host: Trey Stricklin (TS)

Episode Summary

Few passages in the Bible are as familiar to Bible readers as John 3, the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. John 3 of course gives us memorable lines, such as “you must be born from above” (more popularly, “you must be born again”) and of course John 3:16. The chapter has also produced famous interpretive headaches, like “unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). This episode of the podcast seeks to explicate this verse by exploring the strength of the idea that the exodus and its Old Testament imagery provides the context for interpreting John 3.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 330: The Exodus and John 3:5. I’m the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he’s the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike! What’s up?

MH: Well, believe it or not, we’re going to be talking a little bit today about the Exodus. It’s not very far removed from getting out of the book. I guess I just couldn’t help myself. But I kind of like this topic.

TS: Yeah, we just can’t seem to get away from the Exodus. [MH laughs] It is your sweet spot, so...

MH: We need an exodus from Exodus, is what we need.

TS: Right. But you do touch on it on a lot of different angles, so it doesn’t surprise me, or anybody that’s familiar with you. This is kind of your sweet spot. So it’s fine with me!

MH: Yeah, you know... And it’s such a big deal—big event—that it’s not surprising that there are going to be things in the New Testament that connect back to it. And that’s what intrigues me about the topic. I mean, we’re actually going to do a few more of these, where the Exodus material plays some backdrop role to a New Testament passage. So I thought I would start in with this one. But yeah, for those who got through the whole series on Exodus (for you troopers out there), we’re not going to lapse into biblical chronology [laughs] or

anything like that. It's not going to be anything like that. But the Exodus event itself and the way it's written about in the Old Testament actually has a little bit of a role (I think maybe a fundamental role) to how we read John 3. So that's what we hope to accomplish today.

TS: Hey, any time we can connect dots from the New Testament to the Old Testament, I'm all about it.

MH: Yep, yep. And that *is* the sweet spot, I think. That's something I really enjoy.

So let's just jump in here. I mean, John 3 is just so familiar. If there's a New Testament chapter that pretty much any Christian (or most Christians) would know a verse out of, of course it's going to be John 3:16. And chances are high that people have memorized that or some other verse in John 3. I mean, you get these really familiar phrases: "You must be born again," or "You must be born from above" (John 3:3). So you get that. You get John 3:16. The whole story (Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus) is referenced a lot in church and in preaching. It's just a really familiar passage. But the chapter also gives you some headaches. We're going to fixate on one of those headaches today, and that's verse 5, where Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Unless one is born of water and of the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." And that has drifted traditionally to discussions about, "Well, this must be a reference to baptism, so baptism has something to do with salvation," or something like that, because it mentions *water*.

Well, we don't really *do* tradition here. [laughs] You know, I'd rather find some explicable context from the Old Testament that really helps us become more intelligent readers of the New Testament. And so this is going to be one of those episodes as well, starting with... We'll do more of these, but John 3 is really familiar, and of course, the Exodus is quite familiar as well. So I'm going to start reading in John 3, just so that you get the flavor of it again. Maybe I'll just read through John 3:17, or something like that, where we have the climactic statement. And then we'll jump into what we're going to do with this. So reading from ESV, we have:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This 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." ³Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴Nicodemus 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?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the

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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.”

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

So this is real familiar. That’s about half the chapter. For the sake of our purposes today, I think that’s a good way to get it in your head so that we can start thinking about really some of the things that I’ll introduce today.

As I’ve done in these last several topical episodes, I’m going to have a touchpoint resource for people who really want to get into the real nuts and bolts here a lot deeper. And if you’re a MIQLAT newsletter subscriber, at the bottom of every issue there’s a link to an archive where we put these articles. We can’t just throw them up on the internet. But we put the articles there so that people can get them if you’re interested in reading them. And so this article is going to be in there. The author is Timothy Foster. And the title of the article is “John 3:5: Redefining the People of God.” This is from the *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 27:3 (2017). And it’s about 10 pages long (pages 351-360).

So this is an article I came across roughly when it came out (because I usually look at BBR, or I get BBR in the mail), and I thought it was just really not only interesting and intriguing but well done. And it had a good deal of explanatory power, which... I like things that link us back to the Old Testament. Because lo and behold, if Jesus is talking to a Pharisee and says, “How can you be a teacher of Israel and not know this stuff,” he must be referring to that Pharisee’s presumed knowledge of the Old Testament. And that alone, if you really think about it, *that alone* disqualifies baptism. Because baptism hasn’t even been

instituted yet. And you can't say, "Well, that's Jewish proselyte baptism." Well, again, if that's what we're talking about, if that sort of thing is what we're talking about, then the referent would be John the Baptist, and of course he's pointing to Jesus and telling people to follow Jesus. "This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." He doesn't say, "Great! You've been baptized now, and now your sins are gone. Now go follow this guy." That's not what he says.

So we need sort of a fundamental reorientation, those who would link baptism as having some sort of saving, salvific value to eternal life based on this verse, and based on previous baptism (baptism prior to the Christian institution). It really leaves a lot to be desired, when these arguments are attempted. And they're very old. This has been around for quite some time, obviously. And you know, you find it in the Church Fathers and such, but are the Church Fathers looking at Second Temple literature? Are they looking at their Old Testament? Or are they just sort of guessing? You get a little bit of both when you get into the Church Fathers. But I want to suggest something today using Foster's article that he suggests. And it has a lot of explanatory power, and I think you're going to find it very interesting and appreciate it. So Foster's article opens this way. This is the abstract. He writes:

Jesus' demand that Nicodemus must be born again does not concern personal regeneration...

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Just that one line and you can tell that he's in different territory already. He's basically saying, "This line about 'you must be born again' has nothing to do with personal regeneration..."

...rather it points to a shift in the locus of salvation...

In other words, the object of faith. "What is that thing that is inseparably connected to everlasting life with the true God?" It shifts from a focus on Israel "to the Messiah in the coming age." Let me just read that sentence again:

Jesus' demand that Nicodemus must be born again does not concern personal regeneration [MH: like the individual], rather it points to a shift in the locus of salvation from Israel to the Messiah in the coming age.

Let me just stop there. This is why his subtitle is "Redefining the People of God." Because in the Old... When Jesus shows up, before he starts preaching and his ministry and we get the work of Jesus accomplished... Before all that, there was this notion that to be rightly related to the true God... Think believing loyalty here. But the believing loyalty was tied to a covenant (or a series of covenants, but let's just say the Sinai covenant or the Abrahamic covenant—one of those two)... It was tied to a covenant that defined the people of God as this entity called Israel. Okay? If you were in the community, you had access to the truth—the truth about the true God. You had to believe that this God was who he said he was. That he

had voluntarily, out of love, entered into a covenant relationship with you (this people). You had to believe that. And then the way you lived and behaved would illustrate that belief and also would help you perform the function of being a kingdom of priests and a holy people to the rest of the world. But the focus of all that was this entity (this family, this people, this community) called Israel. That's where the whole salvation thing sort of operated from. That was the hub. That was the locus. That was the center. You can't think about salvation without thinking *Israel*, in the Old Testament. You can't separate that out.

So what Foster is going to suggest is that what Jesus is really getting at here is, thinking of salvation as being a member of this people (and it's God's people, known as Israel) is insufficient, now that the messiah is here. We have to think differently about the mechanism—the hub, the locus, the catalyst (whatever word helps here). We have to think differently about how salvation is now offered and accomplished. It's not through believing loyalty to this God in the context of this people, but rather this God now has come as messiah incarnate. And of course, this is before Jesus goes to the cross and whatnot. But he's still... He himself is the lynchpin now of salvation. It is *not* the community of Israel. So again, this is why Foster's subtitle is about redefining the people of God. Jesus is trying to teach Nicodemus that it's not adequate to think of salvation only in terms of Israel—being an Israelite. And you might have the right faith. You might have believing loyalty. "But now that I'm here..." Now that the messiah is here, it shifts to him. So it's like salvation's identity was in a nation—a people—before, and now it's in the person of Jesus. That's an important shift in thinking. So back to the abstract:

The numerous references in the pericope to the exodus [MH: the exodus event, which is leaving Egypt—deliverance from Egypt—through the Red Sea and then taking the people to Sinai—that's what we would think of as the Exodus] suggest that "born of water" alludes to the birth of Israel [MH: *not* the individual conversion] at the exodus. Jesus' demand to be born of water and spirit (v. 5) points to the inadequacy, in the coming age, of belonging to national Israel and the ensuing need for those born into Israel to now be born of spirit [MH: to be born again], or for Jews like Nicodemus to be "born again" (v. 3).

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Nicodemus is sincere. He knows his Torah and all this kind of stuff. He's an Israelite. He's a Jew. But Jesus is saying, "Look, you have been born into *that* community..." And basically "You responded well, and we're having this conversation now. But you have to realize, Nicodemus, that you need to be born again, and what that means is you have to realize the inadequacy of being a member of Israel, and you've got to shift that focus of loyalty now to the messiah. Okay? You need to be born from above—born again." Because what Jesus is doing here is, he's here to present the New Covenant, which of course is coupled with the Spirit—the coming of the Spirit. All these things are going to happen, and he's trying to orient Nicodemus' head (his thinking) to sort of start connecting these dots. "It's not sufficient to just say, 'I'm an Israelite.' Now we have to think

in different terms. This is the age to come. This is the age of the Spirit—the New Covenant, the messiah. I'm here." So your thinking needs to change. You were born into one. You're a member of one. But to be a member of the kingdom of God in the coming age, you have to be born *again*. You have to shift your thinking here over to messiah. And Foster in his last sentence in the abstract says:

This approach resolves several difficulties and the passage better fits the wider context.

So in his article, he's going to lay out his case. Just by way of summary, these are important things to think about as we go through here. Because he's saying, "Look. The language here is not about an individual's conversation." I mean, every individual is going to have to make this shift. That's obvious. We're not denying that and he's not denying that. But we typically interpret this language to be *only* about an individual's decision. And while that'll kind of get us where we need to go (that we have to recognize Jesus as messiah), if you're sort of thinking in that mode, you can kind of stumble through other parts of the passage and get confused by the language and wind up interpreting certain things poorly. And his contention in this article is going to be that John 3:5 is one of those—that it just doesn't get interpreted well. It basically turns into a mess. That people make it sound like it's talking about certain things when it's not. It's not talking about an individual's baptism. It's not talking about that. You have to set the language in the context of the Exodus event, and then we'll be able to see more clearly what it *is* talking about. So as he jumps into this... He says at another point pretty early in the article... And this is going to sound a little bit like the abstract, but it's worded a little bit differently. So I'm going to read it anyway, and then we'll jump into where he starts, as far as talking about the more traditional views first, and what are the problems there. But he says this:

The phrase "no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5) has generated numerous interpretations with debate centered around the meaning of "born of water." If any consensus has emerged, it is that the passage is concerned with the soteriological question of the necessity of regeneration by the Spirit for salvation. This article will develop another interpretation of v. 5, which implies that throughout this discourse Jesus is making an ecclesiological statement that in the coming age those who will inherit the kingdom are not those who are Jews by birth but those who believe in him.

So again, if you approach it the way that Foster's going to argue, it's another one of these things... Jesus is trying not only to get Nicodemus from shifting from thinking about Israel over to the messiah, but when you do that, when the locus of salvation is not national Israel—it's not Torah, it's not whatever people imagine it to be, associated with Israel. Because on this podcast and when I write, I think it's pretty clear that Old Testament salvation was not by merit. You didn't earn it by being a good Torah keeper. It's believing loyalty. But what Foster is angling

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for here, just in his general readership, is that when Jesus has this conversation with Nicodemus, if Nicodemus is getting it, if the lights are going off in his head, he's going to realize that, "Wait a minute, if salvation isn't connected to national Israel and our Torah and our lineage, our genealogy, our descendants from Abraham... If it's not linked to that, then that means *anybody* can have it." And you know, isn't that where John 3:16's going to wind up? "For God so loved Israel?" No. It's "For God so loved the *world*." That is a fundamental distinction for a guy like Nicodemus to hear. And it's not that the Old Testament (the Tanakh) doesn't have Gentile inclusion. It does. But overwhelmingly... 99% of the Jews alive in Jesus' day (in the first century), if you asked them about... If you threw them the question, "What must I do to be saved?" they would say, "You need to be in Israel. You need to be a Jew." And again, we can look at the Old Testament and say, "Well, that's... Okay, yeah, you've got to join the community, but it's still believing loyalty and all those things." We can have that discussion. But for the average Jew of the day, they were almost incapable of discussing the concept of salvation apart from Israel. And what Jesus is saying is, "Look, you've got to change that. Because I'm the messiah for the *whole world*, not just Israel."

So this is where Foster's going in the article. Just look at... We're not even into it yet, but look at just the simple wording, just the *start* of John 3:16, how that changes the game for somebody like Nicodemus. You're only a few words into the verse, and the game is changed. Everything's changed. Because it hits you with a thunderbolt to remember the inclusion of the Gentile in the Abrahamic covenant, to remember the language of Isaiah 66—these things that sort of got forgotten and drowned out in this obsession with the national entity known as Israel. And you know, I'm not saying that's a sinister thing. If you were a member of this community, of course you're going to think in these terms because of your history and Abraham and the Exodus—all this kind of stuff. Of course you're going to think about this. But what Jesus wants is a shift in thinking. I could put it this way: he's bigger than the Exodus. He's bigger than Israel. He's bigger than Abraham. Those things are not the reference points anymore. "Now that I'm here, *I* am the reference point." And it's all nations.

So what Foster proceeds to do in this is he goes through some common academic interpretations of the phrase "born of water". And the first one is kind of obvious. He talks about baptism. It's very common. But he... And he quotes Linda Belleville's article here, an article on John 3:5, which is short. And Belleville has a nice critique of the baptism view of John 3:5. In fact, Foster basically says... And he quotes Belleville for this, so he's not going to take the blame if anybody gets upset. But he says,

To interpret 'born of water' as baptism is nonsensical, because of verse 10.

If you go to verse 10:

¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

And her point is... I'll actually quote it. This is a line from Belleville's article:

It is little short of ridiculous to imagine Jesus reprimanding Nicodemus ... for his failure to understand the necessity of a rite [MH: a ritual] yet to be instituted.

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If Christian tradition is correct in saying that John 3:5 is about Christian baptism, Belleville is saying, “Do you realize how ridiculous that is? There was no Christian baptism. So how can the verse be about Christian baptism? It just makes zero sense.” And I have to agree. I mean, I was there before running into Belleville's article. Foster says Belleville provides five other reasons why the baptism reading just isn't possible, given the context. But he talks about that because it's the most common view. And then he goes on to physical birth. In the evangelical community, I think it's probably fair to say this might be the dominant view. The baptismal view... You're going to get that discussed in Catholic circles and Lutheran circles, Eastern Orthodox. And they all mean a little bit different things. They're not all using the same terminology in the same way. We understand that here. But in your mainline denominations, the baptism view is very prominent. And if you go over to the evangelical... Like the non-denominational churches, community churches, whatever, I think it's fair to say that the physical birth view is more prevalent there. So Foster writes this:

While this view...

The physical birth view. This is the idea that “born of water” means the act of physical birth. The water breaks and the woman has the baby.

While this view preserves the context, it is not consistent with the way John uses figurative language, and it does not explain the rhetorical significance of Jesus establishing physical birth as a condition for entry into the kingdom of God.

By the way, think about that. If physical birth was a condition for entry into the kingdom of God... If physical birth is actually what Jesus means here, what about aborted fetuses? What about spontaneous abortion? What about the contents of the womb that die before birth? “I guess they're out of luck, because of John 3:5.” That's a good example of a question nobody asks but really needs to be asked. If that is what the verse is about, then that is a very logical question. And I would add that those are logical conclusions, too, if Jesus is making physical birth a condition. “Except a man be born of water (physically born) and then born of the Spirit, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” And Foster is saying, obviously he's not at this position (and neither am I, for these reasons and others). But he continues on and says, “It just doesn't explain the rhetorical significance of Jesus establishing physical birth as a condition for the entry to the kingdom of God *if...*”

If, as others suppose, "water" is an allusion to amniotic fluid [MH: the water breaking], then, in the light of John 1:15 [sic] and 1 John 5:6-8, we would expect him to use "blood" instead of "water."

Those other verses... I'll just navigate to them. John 1:15... So you kind of get what Foster is angling for here. That's a typo in Foster's article. It's actually John 1:13. It says this. Let's go back to verse 12. That's the more familiar verse.

¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right [MH: the authority] to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

And you get the same thing with 1 John. Let's go to 1 John 5:6-8. These verses are textually... There are some textual issues here, but I'm going to read them just as they are in the ESV.

⁶ This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. ⁷ For there are three that testify: ⁸ the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree.

So what Foster's saying here is, "You know, if John 3:5 is really supposed to refer to physical birth (the amniotic fluid as the water), in the other places when John uses this water language, he also uses blood to make clear the allusion that he's making. But he doesn't do it here. He doesn't include that." So Foster's like, "That's not very consistent with what John does elsewhere." He continues and says:

Alternatively, if "water" is an allusion to semen...

And I've read this view in commentaries. Because if you're thinking physical birth (born of water), I've seen commentators argue that the water is sort of a euphemistic reference to semen. Because that involves the process of physical birth.

Alternatively, if "water" is an allusion to semen, then not only is this reference remarkably obscure [MH: that's being nice], but "beget" would need to refer to the male agency...

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When John uses this begetting language in John 3, John would have to be referring to the male if the water there in John 3:5 is a reference to semen. So it would have to refer to the male agency, but...

...when Nicodemus's reference to a mother's womb suggests that the feminine action of "giving birth" is instead in view (also Matt 1:1, 4; Luke 1:13, 57).

So what Foster's doing here in the article is he's saying, "You know, if we think about this, there are some inconsistencies here. First, we've got this really odd idea that to be eligible for everlasting life, you have to be physically born. That's problematic. You also don't get John talking here the way he talks elsewhere when he brings up water. There's no reference to blood. And then if you're thinking it's semen, then that changes what Nicodemus is thinking. Because when Nicodemus hears this, he thinks about the process of passing through his mother's birth canal. He's not thinking about the moment when his father inseminated his mother." So we've got disconnects here with this view. So Foster spends some time (I'm just summarizing things here) critiquing that view.

The third possibility he goes through is the language here of water and the Spirit is an allusion to Ezekiel 36:25-27. Let me just read that to you. Actually, I'm going to back up here because basically the wider context is important here. I'm going to start in verse 22:

²² "Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. ²³ And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. ²⁴ I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land.

What should be clicking off in your head right now is Pentecost—this gathering of the nations when the New Covenant... Because Ezekiel 36 is a New Covenant passage. We're going to get references to the spirit and the heart of flesh and the heart of stone. When we went through Ezekiel, we went through the new covenant language here. But you should be thinking of the coming of the Spirit and Pentecost and the gathering from the nations and all that. So let me just return here. He says:

²⁴ I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. ²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. ²⁸ You shall dwell in the land that I

gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. ²⁹ And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. And I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. ³⁰ I will make the fruit of the tree and the increase of the field abundant, that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations.

So on and so forth. So it's this healing of the exile. It's the new covenant. This is what Ezekiel 36 is talking about. Now let's go back to John 3. There's a common view that says that since Ezekiel 36 mentions water and the spirit, that John 3 must be drawing on Ezekiel 36. So Foster writes this:

Where water and spirit come together so forcefully [MH: in this passage], the first to signify cleansing from impurity, and the second to depict the transformation of heart that will enable people to follow God wholly.

This is the argument, that these two things mentioned together... We have cleansing and we have transformation of heart.

This is supported by the expectation that Nicodemus should know this (v. 10) [MH: "How can you be a teacher of Israel and not know this?"] which indicates there is an OT antecedent [MH: to what Jesus is talking about], the "kingdom" language of John 3:5 places the passage within the eschatological orbit of Ezek 36 [MH: this is how the argument goes], and water typically refers to cleansing in the OT, particularly where it appears in conjunction with the spirit...

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Nevertheless, this view is not without difficulties. First, some of the key concepts in John 3 are absent from Ezekiel [36], most significantly the idea of "birth," while key concepts in Ezek 36, such as "heart" are absent in John 3. Secondly, [these] gifts [in Ezekiel] are given *with* the kingdom, not as a precursor to it or as a condition for reception of these gifts.

And again, I think the latter point is the most important. Because in John 3:5, being born of the water and the Spirit are conditions. "Except you have these things, you're not going to be in the kingdom of God." Whereas in Ezekiel 36, it's kind of like a package that's rolled up and given. It's the fulfillment of a promise. It's *given to* the exiles—to Israel in exile. So he's saying, "There are some significant disconnects here." And I would add one other problem with the Ezekiel 36 view. It's clear from the preceding verses in Ezekiel 36 (verses 21-24, which we read) that the imagery here is Pentecost. So how could Jesus be telling Nicodemus that he must be born of the Spirit, when Jesus knew the Spirit wasn't going to come for a while? And he hasn't even really talked about it. We have a chronological disconnect. So this view would seem to equate salvation with the

coming of the Spirit, but it's not. That's not even what Pentecost is doing. The Spirit shows up, but the apostles still have to preach. They preach with other tongues and people have to believe. Just because the Spirit shows up doesn't mean that there's salvation.

So again, you can't take the Ezekiel 36 language and go back to John 3:5 and say that baptism (or odder still, physical birth) has a regenerative effect. I hope you can see how the thinking and the use of these analogies and ideas really gets muddled. It really creates a muddled situation, both for not only verse 5 in John 3, but the wider concepts of baptism and salvation and the exile and all this stuff. "These things sort of look like they might work together, but when you really probe them, they don't," is his point. [laughs] Okay? Salvation in John 3 is *in Jesus*. I mean, that's what John 3:16 says. It isn't in baptism. It isn't in national Israel. It isn't in the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. It isn't these things. It's Jesus himself. So again, since Ezekiel 36 seems to quite clearly point to Pentecost, and it *doesn't* point to the work of Jesus on the cross specifically, we have a bit of a disconnect saying that Ezekiel 36 is the guide for how we should read John 3. So again, what Foster does... I'm just summarizing as he goes through some of these problems. And then he starts talking about, "Well, what might be a better choice?" And then he drifts over to the Exodus imagery and he writes this:

Little has been made of the exodus as the background for this passage, and the implications this might have for understanding v. 5, despite the prevalence of Exodus typology in John's Gospel and the recognition of parallels between the Fourth Gospel and the book of Exodus. Beasley-Murray [MH: who is a New Testament scholar] notes that "a great deal of the OT language employed in the Gospel [MH: of John] is bound up with the concept of Jesus as One greater than Moses, who achieved the redemption anticipated in the second Exodus." In terms of our passage, while the exodus typology is explicit in 3:14...

John 3:14 says, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness..." It's a direct allusion to Moses during the exodus and going through the wilderness.

While the exodus typology is explicit in 3:14, only Sahlin [MH: who's another scholar], as long ago as 1950, [MH: only this guy] has noted the significance of the exodus as background for the Nicodemus discourse as a whole, and this possibility has not been developed, nor have its implications for the meaning of John 3:5 been explored.

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So basically he says, "This is what we're going to do. This is my job now. We're going to drill down into this and see if it's coherent or not." So his points of evidence for an Exodus context to John 3... He goes through several of them in the briefest way possible here. He says, the first thing we need to look at is that

the Nicodemus scene (this conversation) takes place during the Passover. And we get that from the prior chapter (John 2:23), which sets up John 3. I'll read it:

²³ Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵ and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

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

You go right into chapter 3. So the context for the discussion is the Passover. (And that's obvious exodus imagery there if there ever was any.) Second, Foster says, "water and spirit" (verse 5) are found earlier in the Gospel of John in connection with John's baptism. So let's go back to John 1:31. I'll start in verse 29.

²⁹ The next day [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' ³¹ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." ³² And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

So in John 1, Foster's point is that "we get these two things mixed there. We get water and the spirit, just a couple of chapters earlier." And he says, "What's really interesting is where this happens is at the scene of Jesus' baptism. And if you remember (those of you who have read *Unseen Realm*), we actually talk about this in *Unseen Realm* (the baptism scene). Because one of the Old Testament passages that is used in this baptism scene is Isaiah 40 (verse 3 especially). And I'm just going to read you some of the content from *Unseen Realm* about this, just so that it comes back into your head. I wrote this:

We've all read about Jesus' baptism before, perhaps dozens of times—but we have likely missed the context for it. John's gospel (John 1:19–23, 29–31) sets it up this way:

¹⁹ And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem so that they could ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ And he confessed—and he did not deny, and confessed—"I am not the Christ!"

²¹ And they asked him, “Then who *are* you? Are you Elijah?” And he said, “I am not!” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No!” ²² Then they said to him, “Who are you, so that we can give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?” [MH: And here’s where John quotes Isaiah 40:3.]

²³ He said,
 “I *am* ‘the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
 “Make straight the way of the Lord,” ‘
 just as Isaiah the prophet said.” ...

²⁹ On the next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

So Isaiah 40:3 is the context for this baptism scene. Continuing with *Unseen Realm* again:

What’s startling is the passage cited by John the Baptist. He identifies himself with the anonymous voice of Isaiah 40:3 that heralded the coming of Yahweh. The significance is obscured in English translations.

And then I start talking in *Unseen Realm* about the plural imperatives, and it’s the Divine Council and all that stuff. So I’ll skip that and go to the next page, where I wrote this:

The description of the baptism of Jesus added to the unfolding drama—for those who knew what they were reading. Mark’s account of the baptism (Mark 1:9–11) provides some key insights that connect to the Old Testament worldview we’ve been tracking:

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⁹ And it happened that in those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. ¹⁰ And immediately as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens being split apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

There are two items in this passage whose importance is not conveyed in English translation.

First, Mark’s note that the heavens were “split apart” is significant. The Greek lemma is *schizo*. Mark’s choice of the term in connection with the water baptism of Jesus has drawn the attention of scholars because of the use of *schizo* in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament used by Jesus and the

apostles. Not coincidentally, *schizo* is the verb used in Exodus 14:21 to describe the miraculous parting of the sea.

And let me just break into myself here and hold off on the rest of the material from *Unseen Realm*. Do you recall what it was that parted the sea? I mean, this is something we've seen how many times on TV? With the cartoon version or the animated version or the Charlton Heston version. What was it that parted the sea? Let's go to Exodus 15:10. It's a little detail that often gets missed. This is the song of Moses after they cross the Red Sea. And it says:

You blew with your wind. The sea covered them. They sank like lead in the mighty waters.

And it uses the same language in Exodus 14:21:

Then Moses stretched his hand out over the sea, and the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night.

Bible trivia question: What is the Hebrew word for wind? *Ruach*. It's the same word as spirit. *Ruach*. The *Ruach* Elohim, the Spirit of God. *Ruach* is spirit, breath, wind. And it's the same in the New Testament in Greek as well, with *pneuma*. So the language here of both the splitting of the water and the Spirit (the wind), you can actually say it was drawn from the exodus story. Back to *Unseen Realm*:

Think back to our discussion of the exodus event. The deliverance from Egypt was a victory over hostile gods. In Exodus 15:11 Moses asked the rhetorical question, "Who is like Yahweh among the gods?" The answer was obvious: no one. The exodus event was a release from exile. Yahweh brought his people out of Egypt to reconstitute them as a nation and re-establish his Edenic kingdom rule on earth.

Mark wants readers to see that a new exodus event is happening. The kingdom of God is back, and this time it will not fail because it's being led by the visible Yahweh, now incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth.

So the conversation with Nicodemus isn't going to be that far removed from the baptism, which makes Jesus a public figure because of what John says. ("Hey, there's the Lamb of God. Go follow him.") And all that. So again, there's this new exodus idea. Jesus is not only the prophet like unto Moses, who is superior to Moses. He's also come through the waters. And the Spirit present there at the waters marks him as the Son of God, who is going to bring salvation. So what Foster's angling for here in this, his second argument for an exodus context, is: "You know, if you're really thinking of Exodus, this kind of makes sense. It kind of makes sense, the way Jesus would not only be described in these scenes, but when you get to John 3 and Jesus references the water and the spirit, it's quite

conceivable, even if you know the Exodus story in Hebrew or Greek, that you would hear the reference to water and spirit and think of the Exodus. Because that's where the vocabulary also comes from.

Now his third argument is that Moses and the wilderness experience are explicitly mentioned in the passage. We already read that (Exodus 3:14). It's the "as the serpent is lifted up," "as Moses lifted the serpent up..."

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Fourth, he says, this parallel fits with a broader reading of the Gospel of John as highlighting and utilizing a Mosaic typology from Exodus and Deuteronomy. Now there are a few other odds and ends he throws in here. He says there is a repeated reference to signs (in John 2:18, 23; 3:2; 6:2,14). There's a lot of this *sign* stuff going on, which is explicitly linked to the exodus through the association of Moses doing signs. And if you look at 2:23... Let's go to John 2:23 real quickly here.

²³Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs...

Now did you catch that? It's a reference to the Passover combined with a reference to signs—Jesus doing miraculous things, and then we have a Passover. Just like who? "Oh, that guy Moses." Moses had been God's instrument with the plagues. Lots of powerful signs and wonders there. And then we get the Passover. So again, if this story is in your head, there are these natural links that are going to inform how you're reading John 3. Foster also says... He finds it interesting that the scene with Nicodemus occurs *at night*. That's John 3:2. He writes this:

While commentators frequently link this reference to night to the Johannine theme of darkness (*skotia*), the use of *nux* ("night") [MH: it's a different word] makes this link somewhat tenuous.

Let me just stop there. Foster's point here is that, if this was about John's familiar light-versus-darkness talk, he would've used the word for darkness. He would've used *skotia* like he does everywhere else. But he doesn't use that here. He uses *nux*, which is the word for night.

However, *nux* has significance within the exodus account where the plague of the firstborn was unleashed at midnight (Exod 11:4). In the LXX, *nux* is found eight times [MH: eight times] in Exod 11 and 12, including once in each of the climactic verses narrating the death of the firstborn and the departure [MH: the Exodus] from Egypt (Exod 12:29-31) and twice in v. 42 which speaks of the Passover festival [MH: at night]. Further, the language of birth is connected with the exodus by the proleptic [MH: (that's a term that means "looking ahead")]

designation of Israel as God's firstborn (Exod 4:22-23) and the death of the firstborn during the first Passover.

So again... Just that last point. He's saying, you've got this night talk. And then he throws in this other thing about the birth. He thinks that it's significant that you get Israel referred to as God's firstborn in Exodus 4, and then the firstborn of the Pharaoh and the other Egyptians is going to die during the *Passover*, which is at *night*. And of course, that's when they also leave Egypt (that would be the Exodus). So again, Foster's pulling all these little strings (these little threads) to get there. And saying, "You know, I think that the Exodus tradition is probably a better backdrop to read John 3." And then he goes into, "Well, how would this work? What does it help us with?" So he writes this:

However, it is the light that the Exodus background can shed on the much-debated expression in v. 5, "born of water and spirit") that I consider in detail here. My suggestion is that "born of water" references the birth of the nation at the exodus and that to be "born of water" is synonymous with being an Israelite. By demanding that Nicodemus be born "of water *and* spirit," Jesus is pointing to the inadequacy of the birth that Nicodemus, and the Jewish people he represents, have experienced for participation in the kingdom.

In other words, it's not enough to be an Israelite. "Being an Israelite doesn't guarantee you anything, especially since I'm here. You're going to have to believe. You and your fellow Israelites, if they ever want to see the kingdom of God, they cannot trust of this status they have of being an Israelite, of being born through water, of being born a people at the Exodus. That is not sufficient. Being an Israelite doesn't cut it. I'm here now. You must be born again, born from above, born of the spirit." Foster says:

The coming age requires a Jew such as Nicodemus to be "born of the spirit" or "born again" (v. 3). In the coming age, the people of God will be reconstituted around [MH: not Israel, but around] the Messiah, and he must be reborn into a new humanity [MH: a new people of God] by the spirit...

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The proposal that Israel was "born of water" at the exodus finds support from the common designation of Israel as the child of God in the OT, especially in the context of the exodus. In Exodus, Yahweh refers to Israel as his firstborn instructing Moses to say to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son. I said to you, 'Let my son go that he may worship me.' But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son" (Exod 4:22-23). This proleptic designation of Israel as God's firstborn anticipates the events described in Exod 12 where the exodus from Egypt is narrated. In Deut 32:6 [MH: It figures. We got back to Deuteronomy 32 again.], God is designated "Father," and by implication Israel is God's son, while in v. 18, after the experience of Israel in the wilderness is described (Deut 32:10-14)...

And you get more of this language. So on and so forth. I'm not going to read all of it. So he says, "Look, born of water refers to being an Israelite. It's not sufficient. To see the kingdom of God, you have to have... Yeah, you're a Jew. So this is where you start. You're a member of Israel. That's good, because Israel is the people of God, descendants of Abraham. You know who the true God is. You worship the true God. All of this is good stuff. You were chosen (created, really) after the disinheritance at Babel. I mean, we got it. This is important. But it is inadequate. When the messiah has come, you *must* embrace the messiah. You can't reject the messiah and claim that you deserve to be in the kingdom of God—to have everlasting life with God, just because you're an Israelite." Jesus' answer to that is, "No. No, that's not how this works. Now that the new age has dawned (the messiah is here), you have to shift your understanding here. You *must* embrace me as the messiah. If you don't, you cannot rely on just being an Israelite. It's not going to cut it."

So then, lastly, Foster goes to the "born of the spirit" idea. And he says, "This is needed now, since we have the dawning of the new age of the messiah." And he goes back to John 1 to talk about this. I think you'll find this interesting. He writes:

In addition to the exodus background supporting connecting "born of water" with the exodus, the notion of birth has already been introduced in the Prologue where the shift in the locus of salvation is also in view.

He goes, "The same thing's in view in John 1. Being an Israelite is not sufficient."

In John 1:11, the Jewish rejection of the Messiah is anticipated. Jesus came "to his own", but his own did not receive him." Instead, "to those who believed in his name, he gave the right [MH: the authority] to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:12-13). Israel has enjoyed the unique privilege of being children of God, but this privilege now belongs not to Israel but to those who believe in Jesus' name (v. 12). As Keener states, the "will of the flesh" in v. 13, "probably also reflects the context's contrast between children born from God (1:12) and genetic Israel (1:11) [MH: he contrasts verse 12 to verse 11], whom some early Christians called Israel 'according to the flesh' (Rom 2:28; 4:1; 9:3, 5, 8; 1 Cor 10:18; Eph 2:11)." Verse 13 concludes that children of God are not those "born of the flesh," that is, national Israel, but those "born of God."

National Israel is not who the children of God are. The children of God are those born of God, those who believe in Jesus, those who believe on his name. And so what Foster's saying here is, "Look, if you just think about what you're reading in John 1, it's the same thing in John 3. It's not sufficient to be an Israelite. You *must* embrace the messiah." And so the rest of his article... I'm not going to go through all of the details. But he says, "You know, this really helps explain a few things. It explains why Nicodemus should have known. He should've known this."

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I mean, what bigger, more central tradition is there to the Jew than the Exodus? You know? I mean, there just can't be anything bigger. Foster says:

Jesus' expectation that Nicodemus should know these things (w. 9-10) has sent some to the OT in search of passages that speak of regeneration...

Most often Ezekiel 36. But he's saying, "Look, that's not what's going on here. It's not what's going on here. What's going on here is what's going on in John 1. Because that's where the spirit and the baptism are connected as well. It's dipping into the vocabulary through the Septuagint of the Exodus story. This provides not only a better explanation, but it covers very well this charge of Jesus to Nicodemus that "you should know this." There is no bigger tradition in Israel.

Now Foster says it also really hits on why John 3:16 would say what it does. [laughs] You know? John 3:16 makes sense in light of John 1, which we just saw. But if Jesus is expanding entry into the kingdom of God to "the world," then it really makes good sense to read John 3:5 as saying, "You must be, yeah, born of water... Okay. You're an Israelite. Got it. That's where we begin. But if you stay there. If that is your point of orientation for everlasting life, it's inadequate. Because salvation is not just for the Israelite. It's for the world. The rest of the world, they're not Israelites." So what Foster's suggesting here is, "Let's take a look at John 3:16, because everybody knows this verse, and think about what it really meant to Nicodemus to hear that. And then think about John 3:5 in light of that." This is the point, especially with John 3:16 (this transition to salvation for the whole world) that I think what Foster's trying to argue for here makes the most sense. Because it's true. It's true. If God sent his son so that everyone who believes in him... Everyone. For God so loved *the world* (not just Israel—the world), and everyone who believes on him (his son) will have everlasting life. If that's true, then yeah. Being an Israelite is not that. Being an Israelite is not sufficient. It is not adequate. Because salvation now is focused upon (funneled through, whatever language you want to use here) Jesus.

So I think he really has... I'm just throwing it out there. This is one of those episodes where I'm just going to throw this out. And just tell you, I find what he's doing here in this article... And if you're a newsletter subscriber, you can get the whole article and read it. I find what he's doing here very persuasive, because it does make sense of John 3:5, whereas the other views just have problems. They all have problems. And we didn't even get into the wacky ones. The semen one is kind of wacky, okay. I can't remember what Foster's words were, but, like... Oh, he called it *obscure*. Yeah, well, you could call it wacky, too. It makes sense of that language in that verse. But it also makes sense in the context of John 1. It makes sense with the vocabulary usage, hooking back into the Exodus. It makes sense of John 3:16. Again, I find what he's doing here pretty persuasive.

And so I wanted to throw this out because we're going to do more episodes like this, where we're going to look at Old Testament passages... And they're not all

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going to go back to the Exodus. But we're trying to do episodes that, "Hey, you're reading this in the New Testament. Let's think about the Old Testament." Because that can really part the clouds in many respects if we think carefully about what might be going on in the New Testament passages. Especially when the Septuagint is referenced and you get these groupings (these collective terms) and they all sort of wind up at one place (in this case, the Exodus). That's very helpful. So we're going to do more of these episodes that help us read the New Testament better in light of the Old Testament. And I wanted to begin here because everybody knows this passage. Everybody knows John 3:16. But again, have you ever thought about how Nicodemus would've parsed it, especially with this angle of the Exodus?

So I'm hoping that you find this interesting. I find it persuasive. It's up to you. It just gives you good stuff to think about in the text. This is what we're here for, to try to read the text in light of its own context, which... The New Testament context is going to be the Old Testament, and it has its own context, too. So I think it was just a really fascinating article and I wanted to share it with you in this episode.

TS: Yeah, Mike, I'm excited. We need to maybe call this the "Connecting the Dots" series, or something. Because...

MH: [laughs] Yeah, we give it a name.

TS: I mean, seriously. Because...

MH: Yeah, because we had Psalm 91 and we had the "Binding and Loosing"... I'm trying to remember. We had one other one in there, too. But yeah, maybe we could. That's a...

TS: Yeah, yeah. Loosely, somehow, I need to tag that or something, with that. But yeah, that's good. I'm excited about that. Because we just don't do that. We don't read the New Testament, much less able to pick out one verse and connect it back to the Old Testament. I mean, we just... Unless you're tracking on that, you're just not going to read it that way. You're not going to do that.

MH: Right, right.

TS: So we definitely need someone like you to point it out and then connect it. Because it's good stuff.

MH: Yeah, it's stuff to think about.

TS: Yeah, absolutely. Well, we'll get people out on that. And with that, I want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.