

Many Christians believe that the term 'born again' is a New Testament concept, and therefore their understanding is somewhat – though not totally – clouded. On the other hand, the Jews of the 1<sup>st</sup> century had an understanding as well, but they too missed the crux of what it means because they missed the key to understanding it – the Messiah's role in being 'born again'.

In this study, I want to provide a more complete understanding of what 'born again' means by looking at the incident in the scripture where Yeshua defined what it means to be 'born again'. By combining His words as well as the Jewish understanding of the day, we can have a more complete understanding of what the term 'born again' really means.

The incident I am referring to is the night-time encounter between Yeshua and Nicodemus. We find it in John – chapter 3, but to provide additional context, we're going to start in John 2:23 -

<sup>NKJ</sup> **John 2:23-25** Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. <sup>24</sup> But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all *men*, <sup>25</sup> and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.

To set up the narrative of the story of Yeshua and Nicodemus, it is important to note that Nicodemus was likely among those who witnessed many of the above-mentioned miracles and would have linked them to various prophecies of the coming Messiah.

With that background, let's continue on in the narrative -

<sup>NKJ</sup> **John 3:1-15** There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." <sup>4</sup> 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?" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' <sup>8</sup> "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit. <sup>9</sup> Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?" <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? <sup>11</sup> "Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. <sup>12</sup> "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> "No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, *that is*, the Son of Man who is in heaven. <sup>14</sup> "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> "that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

#### 'Again' or 'From Above'?

The Greek word 'anōthen' (509) can be translated as "from above" or as "again". It is oftentimes used in the LXX to translate the Hebrew word 'al' (עַל - 5920 – 'above, upwards, on high') which comes from the Hebrew root word 'alah' (עָלָה - 5927) which means "to go up".

In the KJV, the Hebrew word 'עַל' is always used to reference 'heaven above' or as 'the Most High', as in it is in Hosea 7:16 and 11:7.

Based on Nicodemus' reply to Yeshua (John 3:4) it appears he understood Yeshua to be saying "again". Yeshua, on the other hand, seems to be saying "from above".



This is the end of the narrative<sup>1</sup>, so let's take a look at this passage, and we'll start by gaining a little more understanding of Nicodemus.

### Who Was Nicodemus?

Nicodemus means "innocent of blood". It comes from the Hebrew words 'naqiy' ( נָקִי – 5355) and 'dam' ( דָּם – 1818). In Hebrew, it would be pronounced "Nakidam", but in Greek it would be transliterated as "Nakidamus" because the Greeks add the suffix "us" to masculine names. Many Christian commentaries claim that the name is Greek and that "nikodemus" means "victory of the people" based on the fact that the word 'nike' is the name of the Greek goddess of victory. There are two problems with that understanding because:

- Nicodemus was a prominent Jewish leader<sup>2</sup> and would not have had a Greek name, and –
- When translating a document, you translate the words, but you transliterate the names.

Nicodemus was both a ruler of the Jews and a Pharisee. At a minimum, he was part of the 'Beit Diyn' or 'House of Judgment' within one of the many synagogues in the Jerusalem area<sup>3</sup>. He was more than likely, a high-ranking Pharisee, and a part of the Sanhedrin – the 'Supreme Court' so to speak, of Judea. Yeshua called him "the teacher of Israel"<sup>4</sup>, not just 'a' teacher. That implies that he was probably the head of the Sanhedrin, not just one of its many members.

Nicodemus apparently witnessed the many miracles Yeshua was doing while visiting Jerusalem to observe Passover (2:22) and, like many of his Jewish friends, began to realize that Yeshua was more than just a prophet. After all, no prophet had ever done the things Yeshua was doing - healing the sick, opening the eyes of the blind, cleansing lepers, and more. Though the prophet Elisha had done several miracles, he never did it to the degree that Yeshua was doing it.

So he paid a visit to Yeshua, coming by night so as to not be seen by his Pharisee friends. It appears that because of the signs, he and several from the Jewish leadership knew that Yeshua had to at least be a prophet, but that was it. No way – in their mind - could this Galilean be anything more! But Nicodemus believed he was more. He may be 'the' prophet foretold by Moses<sup>5</sup>. He may even be the promised Messiah! If so, why had He not said so? Why did He tarry in setting up His kingdom? Are we going to have to wait till the Messianic Kingdom to know the answer?

Yeshua - knowing his thoughts – did not directly answer Nicodemus' obvious questions, but instead made this statement –

<sup>NKJ</sup> **John 3:3** ... "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Basically, what Yeshua told him was that "you may never know!" Why? Because you and your friends are unwilling to be 'born again'. To which Nicodemus answered –

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Joh 3:4** "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

To understand what Nicodemus was asking, it is important to know what the Jews in 1<sup>st</sup> century Judea understood about the concept of being 'born again'.

### 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish Understanding of 'Born Again'

<sup>1</sup> many believe that the remaining verses are John's commentary on what happened in the previous verses

<sup>2</sup> John 3:10

<sup>3</sup> Vs. 1

<sup>4</sup> Vs. 10

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 18:15



An underlying belief that is oftentimes missed by Bible students is that in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, the Jews believed they were assured of a place in the Kingdom of God simply because they were descendants of Abraham<sup>6</sup>. That might seem strange until one considers that many, if not most 'Christians' believe they are headed to Heaven when they die simply because they 'believe' in 'Jesus'.

The basis for the Jewish belief is this passage from the prophet Isaiah -

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Isaiah 60:21** Also your people *shall* all *be* righteous; They shall inherit the land forever, The branch of My planting, The work of My hands, That I may be glorified.

This prophecy pertains to YHVH's 'righteous' people and that they will inherit the land of Israel forever. Though the prophecy is found within the context of the period following the Birth pains of the Messiah<sup>7</sup> and the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom, the Jewish sages placed it in the context of the return from Babylon and maintained that belief even into the 1<sup>st</sup> century<sup>8</sup>. Consequently, they believed that being 'born' as a descendant of Abraham gave them a key to the Kingdom of God. They called it "being born of the water" - in other words, being born of the amniotic fluid in their mother's womb. But that's not all!

Since (in their mind) they alone were assured a place in the Kingdom by birth, they believed that everyone else, i.e. – the 'gentiles', were required to be "born again" in order to be a part of the kingdom, For them, 'born again' implied a conversion to Judaism – a process which required a number of steps including repentance and baptism.

That was the mindset of Nicodemus and his friends. Being born as Jews - likely pious ones at that, there was no need for them to be "born again" either ... and if there was a need, how could they be 'be born of the water' again?

Apparently, Nicodemus had failed to understand that the Hebrew people had a long history of being 'born again'. For instance, in the Exodus story, they people were as good as dead as a result of the advancing Egyptian army, but Moses instructed them to go into the water.

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Exodus 14:13** And Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall see again no more forever.

In this story, the Hebrew people all had to look to the salvation of YHVH and enter into the Red Sea if they were going to survive. In that 'watery grave', they left slavery behind and became free men – looking only to YHVH. They were in essence 'Born Again' to new lives, and from that point forward, they – especially those in Judea, understood that 'baptism' signaled a 'rebirth' of the individual - be it simply becoming ceremonially 'clean' in order to enter the Temple precincts, or a bride 'dipping' in a 'mikveh' just prior to marriage – symbolic of leaving the headship of her father for the headship of her husband.

### **Jewish Misunderstanding about being 'Born Again'**

The scriptures show that YHVH had always intended that the Hebrew people be a picture of the Kingdom of God<sup>9</sup>, and because they knew that to be the case, they believed (as mentioned earlier) that their heritage is what guaranteed them a place in that Kingdom of God.

Unfortunately, they seem to have missed the various prophecies and examples that show that they and their Israelite brothers had a history of becoming corrupt and thus losing their 'kingdom' opportunity

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<sup>6</sup> Nicodemus, a Rabbi's Quest, Dr. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, 2005, Ariel Ministries, www.ariel.org

<sup>7</sup> the 'tribulation'

<sup>8</sup> Thus such statements as "and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as *our* father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones (<sup>NKJ</sup> **Mat 3:9**).

<sup>9</sup> Deut. 4:6-8



unless, while in the midst of that corruption, YHVH would send them a deliverer and the people would repent and return to God.

Because of this, Nicodemus and his friends failed to see the purpose of the Messiah in bringing them back to YHVH and back to the Kingdom. They apparently could not see the message in prophecies such as this one by Jeremiah -

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Jeremiah 23:5-8** " Behold, *the days are coming,*" says the LORD, "That I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; A King shall reign and prosper, And execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. <sup>6</sup> In His days Judah will be saved, And Israel will dwell safely; Now this *is* His name by which He will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS. <sup>7</sup> " Therefore, behold, *the days are coming,*" says the LORD, "that they shall no longer say, 'As the LORD lives who brought up the children of Israel from the land of Egypt,' <sup>8</sup> "but, 'As the LORD lives who brought up and led the descendants of the house of Israel from the north country and from all the countries where I had driven them.' And they shall dwell in their own land."

To the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish person, they saw their Messiah to simply be a warrior king who – like David – would fight their battles. They must have thought that since David fought Israel's battles without demanding righteousness from the people – not even from his own sons – The Messiah in Jeremiah's prophecy would do the same. Therefore, repentance, restitution, and sacrifice did not enter into their "kingdom" mindset.

They failed to understand that they no longer had a heart for YHVH (Isaiah 29:13) and that both Israel and Judah had become spiritually dead, in need of YHVH to raise them up. They apparently thought the 'Dry Bones' prophecy of Ezekiel did not apply to them since they still acknowledged YHVH and were still living in the land -

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Ezekiel 37:1-14** The hand of the LORD came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones. .... <sup>3</sup> And He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" So I answered, "O Lord GOD, You know." <sup>4</sup> Again He said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!' <sup>5</sup> Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: "Surely I will cause **breath** to enter into you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup> "I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put **breath** in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I *am* the LORD." ' " ... <sup>9</sup> Also He said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the **breath**, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "Come from the four **winds**, O **breath**, and **breathe** on these slain, that they may live." ' " <sup>10</sup> So I prophesied as He commanded me, and **breath** came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army. <sup>11</sup> Then He said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, 'Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!' <sup>12</sup> "Therefore prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. <sup>13</sup> "Then you shall know that I *am* the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. <sup>14</sup> "I will put My **Spirit** in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken *it* and performed *it*," says the LORD.' "

Though obviously a metaphor, it - as well as the Jeremiah 25 passage - are end-time prophecies of the Israelite people being 'born again'; and the vehicle which brings it about is God's Spirit. Note that the words 'breath', 'wind', and 'spirit' are all from the same Hebrew word "ruach" (7307). It is God's **spirit** that brings about this change. It is God's **spirit** that causes them to see that there is still hope that Israel can have a place in God's kingdom. It should have been clear to Nicodemus and the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish people that having a place in the Kingdom of God is not based on heritage.



Nevertheless, Nicodemus and his fellow Jews believed that simply because they were descendants of Abraham, they possessed the key to the kingdom. There was no need to be 'born again', and even if there was, how can it be done. So Nicodemus asked Yeshua -

<sup>NKJ</sup> **John 3:4** ... "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

He was asking how he could be converted to Judaism since he was already a prominent-practicing Jew? Obviously, he could not crawl back into his mother's womb! And what about his Pharisee friends?

### Yeshua's Understanding of being 'Born Again'

Yeshua's response was that Nicodemus should not wonder about what He was saying. All Nicodemus needed to do is look back into the scripture of the examples of people who - by the Jews own definition, had been or would be 'born again'. That would include:

- the Hebrew slaves to whom YHVH gave new lives after redeeming them from Egypt.
- Rahab and her family who believed that they would be destroyed along with all Jericho if she did not turn her heart to the God of Israel.
- Ruth the Moabites who chose to follow her mother-in-law to the land of the Hebrews in search of a better way, and
- And millions of 'dry bones' that represented a people who believed they were lost forever but would obtain a new life through the work of God's spirit.

In all these cases, their transformation was 'spiritual' – not physical. Their place in the Kingdom would not come about by being a biological descendant of Abraham. Instead, it would come by drinking in the spirit of the one who delivered them.

So Yeshua explained by giving Nicodemus a metaphor –

<sup>NKJ</sup> **John 3:8** "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Yeshua was stating that even though we can feel the effects of the wind, we cannot determine where it comes from, or where it is going. The wind does what it does without our permission and without explanation. Such is the way of a person being born again. It's a spiritual thing – God either puts it in your heart to turn to Him or He doesn't.

This probably came as a shock to Nicodemus who believed that all Jews had a place in the kingdom – even his unbelieving friends. Yeshua was stating the Kingdom was for those who became 'spiritual', not simply those born of Abraham's seed. Is that why Nicodemus could both see AND accept that Yeshua – this uneducated teacher from Galilee – was truly the Messiah? And is that why his friends can't see it? The answer was becoming clear. The Spirit was working with Nicodemus, but not with his Pharisee friends. Maybe YHVH had a job for Nicodemus to perform that did not include his friends.

Nicodemus seemed more perplexed now than before, so Yeshua explained that he shouldn't be perplexed because - as 'the' teacher of Israel, He should know this stuff.

He should know that God chose Isaac over Ishmael. He should know that God chose Jacob's sons, but not those of Esau's. He should know that God chose Judah instead of Joseph to be the tribe from which the King would come. That's just how God works!

Yeshua ended His dialogue by giving Nicodemus an example of what it would take for him and his fellow Jews to be born again and have access to the Kingdom of God and eternal life. Continuing in the narrative, it says -



<sup>NKJ</sup> **John 3:14-15** "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> "that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

Yeshua was referencing the story of the Israelites who were still alive after the 38 years of wandering in the wilderness. So let's take a look at it -

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Numbers 21:4-6** Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. <sup>5</sup> And the people spoke against God and against Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For *there is* no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread." <sup>6</sup> So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.

The Israelites had been fed by God for nearly 40 years, and according to Paul – ‘they all ate spiritual meat and they all drank spiritual drink’ <sup>10</sup>. All their needs were miraculously supplied - but the people all considered it worthless. Such was the same with the Jewish leadership in Nicodemus’ day. They saw Yeshua’s miracles - they saw people being healed and people being brought back to life. They saw lepers being cleansed and demons being cast out, but they accused Him of performing those signs through the power of a foreign god. Let’s continue with the story -

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Numbers 21:7** Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

Apparently, the people believed that Moses would simply intervene for them and have the snakes removed. But that was not how it worked. Even though Moses did pray for them, YHVH required more from the people. They had to do something themselves -

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Numbers 21:8-9** Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; **and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.**

Note that before the people cried out to Moses, when they were bit by the snakes – many died. But YHVH told Moses that if they wanted to live, they had to BELIEVE what Moses had said, AND - look at the snake on the pole!

“Look at the thing that is biting me and killing my friends?” they probably thought! It seemed so foolish. Nevertheless, it was their only hope. So they looked up at the snake on the pole and they lived. Being saved from the snakes had nothing to do with their genealogy – whether they were Hebrew or Egyptian, supporter of Moses or his enemy, part of the mixed multitude or not – they simply had to look up!

This would be the case for the Pharisees in Yeshua’s day. Though Yeshua was a ‘thorn in the flesh’ to them, a threat to their power and prestige; if they wanted a place in the Kingdom of God, they too would have to ‘look up’. They – like Nicodemus, would have to believe what was obvious – that Yeshua was the Messiah. They would have to believe on Him who fit the Messianic prophecies of old. They would have to realize that simply being of the lineage of Abraham did not provide them a key to the Kingdom of God. In essence, they - just like a proselytes and gentiles - had to be ‘born again’, or shall we say ‘born from above’.

Did the Jewish leadership choose to look up to the only one who could provide them salvation? Were they willing to be born again? It appears they did not. Instead, they chose to condemn Yeshua – except for one - Nicodemus.

### **Nicodemus – a ‘Born Again’ Pharisee**

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<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:3-4





John's account of Yeshua's life shows that Nicodemus made the change. He heeded the obvious. Yeshua was the Messiah, and so he supported His message. This is shown by his actions during His last Feast of Tabernacles on earth when the Pharisees plotted to kill Him -

<sup>NKJ</sup> **John 7:44-52** Now some of them wanted to take Him, but no one laid hands on Him. <sup>45</sup> Then the officers came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why have you not brought Him?" <sup>46</sup> The officers answered, "No man ever spoke like this Man!" <sup>47</sup> Then the Pharisees answered them, "Are you also deceived? <sup>48</sup> "Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him? <sup>49</sup> "But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed." <sup>50</sup> Nicodemus (he who came to Jesus by night, being one of them) said to them, <sup>51</sup> "Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?" <sup>52</sup> They answered and said to him, "Are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee."

Nicodemus apparently continued to believe the obvious – Yeshua was the Messiah. He tried to slow his Pharisee counterparts down and force them to at least let Yeshua have his day in court but was apparently overruled.

<sup>NKJ</sup> **John 19:38-42** After this, Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate gave *him* permission. So he came and took the body of Jesus. <sup>39</sup> And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. <sup>40</sup> Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury. <sup>41</sup> Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. <sup>42</sup> So there they laid Jesus, because of the Jews' Preparation *Day*, for the tomb was nearby.

So, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea buried Yeshua. Apparently, Nicodemus received the words of Yeshua and put them in His heart. He no longer looked upon his Jewish lineage to carry him into the Kingdom of God. Instead, he believed the obvious. The miracle working carpenter from Galilee was The Messiah, and contrary to the pressure of Pharisee friends who could not believe the obvious, he chose to follow Yeshua.

Shalom Aleichem