

here of going back and starting life over again, as Nicodemus suggests by his reference to a new physical birth (verse 4), but rather of the necessity of a complete cleansing from sin. In later times it would be easy for people to see that this statement finds a typical representation in the baptism of Christians with its indication of divine cleansing. Thus, the verse contains a suggestion in advance of Christian baptism, but hardly refers directly to it.

This interpretation of water, it seems to me, is abundantly borne out when we look at the next statement "of spirit". Nicodemus would immediately recall the original creation, in which God took the man, made of the dust of the earth, and breathed into him the breath of life. He would appreciate that the natural man, no matter how thoroughly cleansed, could not be spoken of as reborn, unless there was also a revivifying action of divine spirit. It would involve spirit as well as cleansing to make a new creature. Having once recognized, as pointed out in this verse, the necessity of spirit for the new creation, it would be a natural step forward, in the next verse, to recognize that only the divine Spirit could perform this spiritual act. Consequently, in the next verse, we find the word "spirit" both without the article, as here, and also with the article, as indicating explicitly the divine Spirit. "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit." The significance of this use of "spirit" without the article in verse 5 is brought out by examination of other passages in which the word is similarly used in a generic rather than in a specific sense, such as John 4:23 and 24 "worship him in spirit, and in truth", John 4:23 "God is a spirit", John 6:63 "the words ... are spirit, and are life". With these we contrast John 1:32 "the Spirit descending", John 7:39 "this spake he of the Spirit", etc.

Thus it impresses me that both "water" and "spirit" are used in verse 5 in a general sense, without direct reference to the water of baptism or to the Holy Spirit. The next verses show that only the Holy Spirit could fill this need, and thus lead inevitably to recognition of His person and activity. Moreover, later Christians could realize the appropriateness of baptism as a symbol of the cleansing from sin which only the Spirit could accomplish. These matters are implicit but not explicit in the verse. However to find here a direct reference to baptism seems to me to go contrary to the generic use of both words in the verse, to presuppose a knowledge of baptism on Nicodemus' part at this time which is