Jesus Came Through Water and Blood: 1 John 5.6

Published in SIL Notes on Translation Vol. 4 No. 4 (1990): pp. 35-38
Revised November 2026 - Iver Larsen

One of the most puzzling verses in 1 John is 5.6: "This is the one who came by water and blood-Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies because the Spirit is the Truth" (NIV). John is using the words "water" and "blood" in a figurative sense, but the meaning of the figure is not clear from the context. The majority of commentators suggest that "water" stands for Jesus' baptism and "blood" for his death. However, a few people think that "water" and "blood" collectively refer to his death (John 19.34). Still others think that "water" refers to Jesus' physical birth and "blood" to his physical death. The purpose of this article is to suggest that this last interpretation has more merit to it than one might be led to think from the majority of English commentaries. It makes much better sense in the context, and it is solidly based on exegetical principles derived from linguistics and relevance theory.

It is commonly accepted that one of the main concerns John had when he wrote both the first and second letter was to go against the false teaching of Docetism which basically states that Jesus was not a true human being but was a spirit who appeared in the form of a person. This is especially clear from 1 John 2.18-23, 26, 4.1-6, and 2 John 7. The proof case John gives is whether a person acknowledges that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who "came in the flesh," that is, that Jesus was sent from God into this world as a human being. (John uses the word "flesh" to denote a human being, while Paul primarily uses the same word to denote what belongs to the old nature of Adam in contrast to the new nature of Christ in us).

As we try to collect evidence for understanding 1 John 5.6, we shall first be looking at the immediate context. Then we shall look at John's Gospel, which bears many marks of coming from the same author as John's letters.

The word "coming" in 5.6 refers primarily to Jesus' coming **into the world**, that is, to his birth. But, in a wider sense, it also refers to his coming **from God** to live as a human being on earth.

It is most likely that the two metonymies of water and blood refer to two different events rather than two aspects of the same event. This follows from verse 8 which says that there are three different witnesses and they agree in their witness to Jesus' humanity: the water, the blood, and the Spirit.

The blood metonymy may allude to how blood was shed when Jesus died. The word "blood" is commonly used in the New Testament as a figure of speech denoting death (for example, Acts 5.28 "You are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood"). If Jesus had only had the appearance of a human body, no blood would have come out when he died-a spirit does not have blood (cf. John 19.34). Therefore, when his death was accompanied by the shedding of blood, it was a witness to (or proof of) his humanity.

The water metonymy is more difficult. In the context of water in a well in John 4, Jesus uses the metaphor of "living water" referring to the Holy Spirit, who is the source of eternal and spiritual life in a person. The same metaphor is used in John 7.38-39 where it is explicitly stated that it refers to the Holy Spirit. These references to living water are not similar enough to the figure of speech in 1 John 5.6 to shed any light on its use there. As far as I know, there is only one other place in the Bible where the word "water," unqualified by another word, is used in a figurative way, and that is John 3.5, which has traditionally been as puzzling to commentators as 1 John 5.6.

There are passages in which the word "water" is part of a cleansing motif that has a metaphorical sense. That is, in these contexts, the cleansing with water does not refer to a physical bath but to a spiritual cleansing. However, in all such cases, the figurative meaning is carried by a word for cleansing (occasionally with the word "water" added) but never by the

word "water" alone. No such cleansing is in view in John 3.5, but rather the theme of birth, so these cleansing contexts are not relevant for a discussion of John 3.5 and 1 John 5.6.

We shall now look at John 3.5 and 1 John 5.6 together in order to see whether the same meaning can be attached to both. In the passage from John 3, Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Some commentators suggest that the word "night" here has a figurative meaning and that John is alluding to his common walking-in-the-light versus walking-in-the-darkness theme. Such an interpretation is far away from the context and not supported by it. Relevance theory encourages us to choose a simpler interpretation whenever a simpler interpretation is at hand. Nothing in the context allows us to assume that the word "night" should not have its normal literal meaning, and there are good reasons why Nicodemus should have sought Jesus after dark (cf. John 19.39). Being a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus dared not show that he was in opposition to the majority of his fellow Sanhedrin members and Pharisees by being positively drawn to Jesus. He may have wondered whether Jesus was not, in fact, the awaited Messiah. To show that he does not want to be too open about his interest in Jesus, he uses "we" in his opening remark. This may just refer to himself, although we do not know whether there were already other Sanhedrin members who had similar thoughts. It definitely did not refer to the Sanhedrin as a whole. (Later, Joseph of Arimathea is mentioned as a Sanhedrin member who secretly was a disciple of Jesus and who together with his friend Nicodemus arranged for the burial of Jesus-see John 19.38-40 and parallels).

In his response to Nicodemus, Jesus started with the topic of being born again. "Unless a person is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." This was a new concept for Nicodemus and he was thinking along human lines in his response: "How can a person be born physically for a second time?" Jesus repeated his statement with a slight variation: "Unless a person is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. What is born of flesh is flesh, but what is born of spirit is spirit."

Here, Jesus acknowledges that Nicodemus was not getting the meaning because he was thinking of physical birth. Therefore, Jesus contrasts the two kinds of births, the physical and the spiritual. The physical birth follows the laws of nature; that is, what is born physically is in essence like the parents-what is born of flesh (a human being) is flesh (another human being). The spiritual birth must be produced by the Spirit of God. The two kinds of birth are on two different levels. Both are necessary for a person to come into the kingdom of God. First, one needs to be born physically and then, one needs to be born spiritually. Everyone is born physically through his human parents, but that is not enough. A second birth, a spiritual birth, is needed. This second birth is what Nicodemus needed.

If we accept that "what is born of flesh is flesh" refers to the natural, physical birth (the first birth), and if we accept that "what is born of the spirit is spirit" refers to the supernatural, spiritual birth (the second birth), then it is logical to go back to verse 5 and link the expression "born of water" to the first birth (to "being born of flesh)," since the second half of the phrase in verse 5 ("born of spirit") is the same as the second part of verse 6. Verse 6, then, may be taken as an amplification of the short expression "born of water and spirit" in verse 5. We may consider this amplification to have been added as a clarification, for it is one of the most fundamental principles of exegesis that the immediate context is the most important evidence for how to interpret a difficult expression. According to relevance theory, Jesus in his response ought to be answering Nicodemus's question. The word order in verses 5 and 6 clearly shows that the main topic of Jesus' answer is "how to be born again," and in his comment he is contrasting the fleshly birth with the spiritual birth. Jesus is not saying that Nicodemus needs to be "born of the flesh," but he does say twice that Nicodemus needs to be "born of the Spirit."

If, as I am suggesting, the expression "born of water" (water-birth) refers to natural, physical birth, what basis could there be for such a figure of speech? Well, Jesus was speaking to an elder in Israel, a member of the Sanhedrin. One of the requirements for becoming an elder was that he be married. So Nicodemus would probably have had several

children, and he would know that before a child is born, the water breaks. (Births in those days took place at home and were, of course, a common experience.) Nicodemus would know, as most parents do, that the birth of a child is imminent when a flow of water comes from the mother's womb. So it is not unreasonable to assume that Jesus' use of the expression "being born of water" refers to natural birth. It does not seem to be a common idiom at the time of Jesus, but it fits the context very well. (The Living Bible has taken this interpretation as the most likely one.)

Now we look again at 1 John 5.6: Jesus "came through water and blood" fits nicely with the water being a reference to his physical birth. His birth was undoubtedly preceded by a flow of water, for Jesus was born just like any other human baby. A spirit is not "born" in this way. Jesus Christ was a human being from his birth to his death. Not only was he born as other human beings are born, with water coming out, but the manner of his death also showed that he was truly a human being, in that when he was speared in the side, blood came out.