Born of water and John 3:5

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In John 3:5 Jesus says to Nicodemus: “no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” This is a very well-known statement, but it contains an enigmatic phrase “born of water”.

In order to study the meaning of “water and/also/even/as well as spirit” in John 3:5, I suggest to look at this from two angles. First, a linguistic word study, and then from the vantage point of communication theory. The reason for my rendering “and/also/even/as well as” is that the Greek *kai* can have any of these meanings.

The word “spirit” is not a problem, since it has its normal sense. A spiritual birth (born of spirit) is different from a natural birth. The problem is what is meant by “water”.

When I look at how the word “water” is used in the Bible, I find 4 different usages:

Literal water

Water as a symbol

Water as a metaphor

Water as a metonym

Let me here restrict myself to the 21 times we find “water” in John’s gospel, because he has all four usages:

Literal water occurs the following verses: 1:26,31,33; 2:7,9; 4:7,13,15,46; 5:7; 13:5; 19:34.

The last one is the blood and water from the dead body of Jesus. It is likely that the “water” here refers to blood serum, which is a watery fluid separated from the blood plasma.

When the literal water refers to baptism, it also has a symbolic meaning of spiritual cleansing, so 1:26,31,33 can at the same time be listed under the symbolic usage of water.

There are no other instances of symbolic usage of water in this gospel, but of course, the word baptism implies water in many cases and has a similar symbolic meaning.

Water as a metaphor is used in 4:10,11,14,15 and 7:38.

A metaphor means a real object used to picture or point to something else which may be an abstract idea. In order to show that Jesus is not talking about literal water, he calls it “living water”. This also means fresh water in Hebrew, but it is more likely in these contexts that it means “life-giving water” where the life is spiritual rather than literal, since Jesus is speaking to people who already have the natural life. The water is a picture for the message

of salvation, the gospel. Meaning-based translations like the GNB and CEV call it life-giving water.

The interchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is illustrative both in terms of the meaning of "water" and the communication strategy that Jesus employs. Let me quote most of John 4:7-15 here from the NIV with sense number in parenthesis. I am doing this as background for the study of John 3:5:

When a Samaritan woman came to draw (1)water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" … The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" … Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living (3)water." "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this (1 and 3)living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, *as did also* his sons and his livestock?" Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this (1)water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the (3)water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the (3)water I give them will become in them a spring of (3)water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this (1 and 3)water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw (1)water."

(Notice that NIV translated the *kai* with "as did also".) Jesus introduced "living water" which is a totally new concept to the woman, so she does not understand that water is used as a metaphor for a new spiritual life. Like literal water is needed to sustain literal life, spiritual water is needed to give and sustain spiritual life. The woman's answer shows that she is thinking of literal water, which Jesus could not give her, since he had nothing to draw water with.

Jesus does not answer her questions directly (which he rarely does), but he has an obligation to explain to her what he meant by living water, since she did not understand. He points out the difference between literal water(1) and the spiritual water(3) to help her understand that he was not talking about literal water or fresh water. The woman's answer shows she still has a very unclear picture of that "living water", since she is talking about not needing to come back all the time for literal water. She is thinking of literal, human thirst rather than spiritual thirst. I am not looking at the word "thirst" here, but like many other words used in John, it has both a literal and spiritual sense.

Water as a metonym – 3:5

A metonym means that one word is used to stand for an associated idea. This is not a common usage of "water", although metonyms are used hundreds of times in the Bible, and quite often misunderstood. There is one other place where John uses the same metonym, namely in 1 John 5:6-7. It will take too long here to argue for this, but it is a crucial part of the argumentation. The idea is that the amniotic fluid is used as a metonym for birth,

because the child comes out of or through that water at birth. Some of the arguments are available in another article called: “Jesus came through water and blood.”

Let me now briefly address communication theory. A good place to start is the Cooperative Principle, first formulated by Paul Grice in 1975 and developed by Sperber and Wilson in 1995 in their ground-breaking book on Relevance Theory. The linked Wikipedia articles are helpful and have more references.

The Cooperative Principle is further explained by four maxims:

Maxim of quality - *Try to make your contribution one that is true, based on evidence*

Maxim of quantity – *As informative as required, but not more*

Maxim of relevance - *Be relevant (Think about what the addressee already knows and needs to know)*

Maxim of manner – *Be perspicuous (Avoid obscurity and ambiguity)*

A speaker can both flout and violate a maxim. If they violate a maxim, they appear not to be cooperative, but they can flout a maxim for a specific reason without being uncooperative. Jesus often flouts the maxim of manner for the purpose of memorability and creating spiritual thirst and interest to know more.

I suggest that this is what Jesus did in his dialogue with the Samaritan woman when he introduced the concept of “living water”. He did exactly the same when he said to Nicodemus in 3:3 “No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” Let us have the text in front of us:

v. 3 Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” v. 4 “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” v. 5 Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. v. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. v. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You(plural) must be born again.’ v. 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

The statement ”they must be born again” flouts the maxim of manner in order to introduce the fundamental concept of being “born again”. Like the woman at the well, Nicodemus does not understand. He takes “born again” in a literal sense rather than spiritual. Jesus is obligated by the cooperative principle to explain what he meant. The first part of the explanation repeats the requirement for entering the kingdom of God, but adds a bit: “they are born of water **and/as well as** spirit.” Would this be enough for Nicodemus to see the contrast between literal birth and spiritual birth? Maybe not, so Jesus explains that literal

birth is about a human mother giving birth to a human child (old/known information for comparison), and that spiritual birth is about the Spirit giving birth to a spiritual child (new information). So, Jesus repeats. “You must all be born again.” Jesus is not saying that “you must be born of water.” He is saying that it is not enough to go through the water birth=literal birth, but another birth is needed after the water birth, the spiritual birth.

In conclusion, it seems to me that linguistics and communication theory provide the best answer to understanding what Jesus probably meant. I am aware of the common baptism interpretation, but this does not fit the context. Nor does the cleansing aspect of baptism/water fit the context. The “water” is literal, but used as a metonym to point to an associated idea.

Much more could be said, for instance, that English and Greek have a “both…and” construction which is not in Hebrew. As a translator, I would suggest “born from both water and spirit” or maybe “born from water and also from spirit.”