

Born Again: A Jewish Concept

In the gospel of John, chapter 3:3, there is recorded a conversation between Yeshua (Jesus) and a leader of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus. In the conversation which ensues, Nicodemus is captivated by Yeshua and his works, and consequently is seeking answers. Yeshua says to him, "Verily, verily I say unto you, except a man is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God". Nicodemus replies, "How can a man be born when he is old?" Yeshua then begins to reveal something of the workings of the Ruach Hakodesh (Holy Spirit). Yeshua comments, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God". This appears to confuse Nicodemus even further, as he retorts "How can these things be?" in verse 5. Yeshua mentions his kingdom for the first time in this conversation, in verse 6, He clarifies this kingdom, which is a kingdom in the Ruach Hakodesh, and in clarifying it Yeshua reveals the distinction between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom on earth. In verses 7 and 8, Yeshua tries to explain the born again experience and how to live in the Holy Spirit. It appears in point of fact that Nicodemus is not a typical Jewish name, we must therefore assume that he is a descendant of the Hellenists left behind by Alexander the Great, that has taken on the Pharisaic teachings. This therefore is the reason that Yeshua in v.10 asks "Art thou a master of Israel and knowest not these things?" Yeshua continues to say

"We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen, and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you believe not, how shall you believe if I tell you of heavenly things?"

Just what had Yeshua said that Nicodemus, as a ruler of Israel ought to have known? The answer is this. In his discourse about water and the Spirit, Yeshua as the consummate of all Pharisees was quoting Ezekiel 36:25-27. In which Ezekiel prophesies a time in the life of Israel when God will cleanse the heart, take away their filthiness and idolatry, and give them a new heart and a new spirit, and cause them to walk and keep his statutes and judgements. The metaphors used by Yeshua are the same as those used by the prophet Ezekiel, talking about water, the Spirit and the ability to walk in the Spirit of Yahweh. This should have been realised by Nicodemus as a teacher of the people. However this was also true in the Law of Moses.

The foundation of Jewishness is a covenant between God and the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This covenant was first sealed by circumcision, and then second by the Law which was given to Moses on Sinai. Conversion therefore, in the case of the Jew, is an entry into the covenant between Yahweh and his people Israel. Jews therefore, are not coming into the covenants of God for the first time as such, although they are still sinners and need to repent, but are fulfilled in Yeshua, only Gentiles can be converted as they had previously not been a part of any of the covenants of God. Furthermore, the Brit Hadassah (New Covenant) is a Jewish covenant, (Jer 31:31) not as many Gentiles think, a Gentile covenant to which Jews must convert.

The question begs then, in the light of all which has been said so far, what actually was Yeshua telling Nicodemus, in saying that he must be born again? Simply this, in point of fact, there are five ways in which a Jew can become born again. First, he is born again on becoming a Jew under the Mosaic covenant; second, on having his bar mitzvah; third, on getting married; fourth, on becoming a rabbi, fifth, on becoming a king; and sixth, on becoming a member of a yeshiva; (bar mitzvah is a modern addition to the five, as it did not begin until the 13th century.). It is noticeable on first reading this list, that one appears to

transcend the other, and what Yeshua was saying was that the Mosaic Law came that we might identify sin in the flesh. Having identified sin in the flesh, through the death of Yeshua we transcend the Mosaic Law with its seal of circumcision, and enter the New Covenant with its seal In the Holy Spirit.

In conjunction with this, the Mosaic Law contains five categories of non-Israelite observance (most likely constituting 'The Mixed Multitude' which came out of Egypt with Israel). THE STRANGER or NOCHRI (these have the fewest rights under the Law (Deut.14:21, 15.3, 17:15, 23:20.)). THE GENTILE SLAVE, or EVED (he was circumcised in order to take part in certain observances, however he still attained a lower status (Gen.17.: 12 13, Ex.12:44, 20.10, Lev.22.11)). THE RESIDENT or TOSHAV and THE HIRED SERVANT or SACHIR (both of these were entitled to community support, but were excluded from sacrificial meals (Ex.12:45, Lev.22':10, 95:6-35, Deut.24:14.)). Finally, THE SOJOURNER or GERIM, understood today to be the convert. The term 'Ger' or 'Gera' is used today to describe a convert to Judaism, and he/she is considered to have all the same obligations and most of the rights of someone born Jewish, and is thus seen as someone who is Born Again, a new person with a clean slate. All who enter a new country are expected to abide by its laws. This was precisely the point Yeshua was making in introducing Nicodemus to his own kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven.

It must also be understood that the Covenant of Judaism is legally binding and is administered by a court system (Deut 16:18-20). The penalty in law for breaking or ignoring this court is death. Therefore all who enter this New Covenant, both Jews and Gentile are requested to abide by its laws, just as any citizen of any country.

In the days of Yeshua, the Pharisees were the God given authority with the Sanhedrin ruling for them from the Temple in Jerusalem. Yeshua acknowledged this in Matthew 23:3.,also found in Deut 17:8-12 However, because of the constant hypocrisy of some of its members, Yeshua, Son of the Living God discredited their authority on earth in order to give it to another (Matthew 21: 43). The others to which it was given was Peter, James and John (Matthew 16:18-19) However, ultimate authority belongs to Yeshua only (Matthew 23:8-10) the keys of the kingdom where the authoritative administration of salvation from on high, as prophesied by Isaiah 22: 22 -25.

In Isaiah 22:22, the prophet speaks of the keys of the house of David being transferred to Yeshua. Also, prior to that in 1 Chronicles 9:26-27, there were four chief porters among the Levites that lodged around the house of God because the charge was upon them to look after the four gates and the walls of Jerusalem, and to open them every morning. Therefore, in like manner, the keys to enter the Kingdom of Heaven were given to Peter, James and John. The fourth key was given to Rabbi Sha'ul of Tarsus, who himself states in 1 Cor.15 :8, that he was one born out of time.

In conclusion and with the hindsight of the Jewish background, Nicodemus was being taught something of the plan of God for salvation. Yeshua was also teaching him that he had not come merely to condemn them (the Jewish people), but that through him they might be saved. In short, he had come to be the fulfilment of Torah, and the prophets, and if Nicodemus would accept this, he would transcend to where all Jews want to go, to the bosom of the Father. He would be born again.

Moreover, the Rabbis teach three characteristics of authentic repentance.-

- 1) Recognition of wrong doing, accompanied by confession
- 2) The resolve or determination to stop doing wrong.
- 3) Followed by an actual and appropriate response of doing the right thing

All of these need to be accompanied with the understanding of the difference between repentance and remorse.

Finally, faith needs to be based on the understanding of Yeshua's words, not on a system or programme such as the 'Alpha Course'. Yeshua said that unless we receive the kingdom as a little child, we cannot enter therein (Luke 18:17)

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