

KNOWLEDGE OF EARTHLY THINGS? THE USE OF ἐπίγειος IN JOHN 3:12

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Abstract

Jesus' remark in John 3:12 that if Nicodemus does not believe what Jesus has told him about the earthly things, how will he believe if Jesus tells him about the heavenly things, poses the reader with a difficult question: what do "earthly things" refer to, especially since the contents of Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus were the Holy Spirit and his work. What type of knowledge is suggested here? Several possible solutions are discussed followed by a detailed analysis of the context to try to establish the possible referents for τὰ ἐπίγεια. A possible solution suggested is that τὰ ἐπίγεια refers to the human acceptance of the experience of the birth from above through the Spirit, without being able to understand it properly.

1. The Problem

In his discussion with Nicodemus, Jesus remarks in John 3:12 that εἰ τὰ ἐπίγεια εἶπον ὑμῖν καὶ οὐ πιστεύετε, πῶς ἐὰν εἴπω ὑμῖν τὰ ἐπουράνια πιστεύσετε; ("if you [plural]¹ do not even believe what I have told you about the earthly things [τὰ ἐπίγεια],² how will you believe if I tell you about the heavenly things [τὰ ἐπουράνια])."³ Taken in isolation, this statement seems

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- 1 There is some significance in this plural that will be discussed later. Jesus was talking to Nicodemus, but in verse 11 the singular changes into a plural. A different "audience", to which Nicodemus evidently belongs, is therefore addressed in the subsequent discussion.
 - 2 Cf. Bauer (1988, 590): "d. irdischen Dinge". Without going into detail, it must nevertheless be mentioned that a survey of the history of Johannine research showed that this issue received very little attention in the relevant literature.
 - 3 Both τὰ ἐπίγεια and τὰ ἐπουράνια occur only once in the Gospel. This might possibly indicate that these terms should not be interpreted according to the dualistic pattern in the rest of the Gospel, but that a special nuance in the meaning should be noted. That this is indeed the case will hopefully be illustrated in this article.

to express a conventional contrast (dualism) between the heavenly and earthly, for which the Fourth Gospel is well known (Van der Watt 2000; 2008, 30ff.).

However, if the immediate context is taken into account, a problem arises: What exactly does τὰ ἐπίγεια refer to in this context? ⁴ According to the tense used for “say” (εἶπον) in verse 12, Jesus has already told (aorist) them about the “earthly things”, and can (will) tell (εἴπω—aorist subjunctive with a condition [ἐάν], which implies a future action under certain conditions) them about the heavenly. Accordingly, within the logic of this narrative it seems as if the τὰ ἐπίγεια refers to what was talked about in the preceding discussion between Nicodemus and Jesus. The exact problem lies here. Jesus has spoken about the new birth, the birth from the Spirit; how can this be described as τὰ ἐπίγεια or *earthly* things, which seems to be “inferior” or less difficult to believe than the *heavenly* things? Surely, the Spirit with his actions could, and should, be related to the “*heavenly* things” in this Gospel.

The purpose of this article is to reconsider the problem of the function, and reference of, τὰ ἐπίγεια in 3:12 within the framework of what is, and is not, known.⁵

4 In the New Testament τὰ ἐπίγεια is used in John 3:12; 1 Cor 15:40; 2 Cor 5:1; Phil 2:10, 3:19; Jas 3:15. In all the cases it occurs in contrast to ‘heavenly things’. In Phil 3:19 and Jas 3:15 the ‘earthly things’ are described negatively, even as being unspiritual and of the devil. In Phil 2:10 the term τὰ ἐπίγεια is however being used in a neutral sense to refer to an earthly locality. In 1 Cor 15:40 and in 2 Cor 5:1 a contrast between different categories is found, which is not negative in nature. It is clear that a single meaning for ἐπίγειος cannot be isolated, which does not help us with the solution of the problem in John. Τὰ ἐπίγεια is however constantly being used to distinguish between two categories namely the heavenly and the earthly. This distinction can be negative, but need not be. In John the distinction is clearly not negative, since both must be believed in and are revealed by Jesus. Rather, it points to the (neutral) contrast between two categories namely the earthly and the heavenly. Cf. also Flavius Josephus *Ant.* 6.186 and *Ant.* 8.44.

5 Although τὰ ἐπίγεια is used in contrast to τὰ ἐπουράνια, only τὰ ἐπίγεια will be focused on in this article. This is possible since the two terms refer to different things. The solution suggested for τὰ ἐπίγεια will of course have implications for the understanding of τὰ ἐπουράνια, and that will be indicated.

2. Some Suggested Solutions to the Problem⁶

A large measure of consensus exists that the use of τὰ ἐπίγεια in 3:12 has something to do with the remarks made by Jesus in the preceding Nicodemus dialogue (3:2-8).⁷ This means that a solution to the problem is usually (though not always) sought in the light of this immediate context.

2.1 *A wider context?*

The opinion of Thüsing⁸ that the respective references of τὰ ἐπίγεια and τὰ ἐπουράνια go far beyond the present context should be critically questioned. His argument that the term τὰ ἐπίγεια refers to Jesus' words spoken during his earthly ministry and τὰ ἐπουράνια to his post-resurrection words spoken through the Paraclete, has met with critical rejection, since there is little evidence in this context, or in the Gospel as a whole, to support such a view.⁹

2.2 *Arguments based on earthly locality*

Although it is recognized that birth from the Spirit should be seen as a "heavenly activity", "water" in 3:5 is interpreted as referring to baptism. Baptism,¹⁰ and with that the "new birth" and consequent reign of God (Belser 1905, 106; Bernard 1969⁷, 110-111), take place on *earth*.¹¹ The

6 A general remark about my impression in dealing with this issue seems in order. The little attention this issue received in the literature was surprising to me. Articles dealing with the problem are relatively few and commentaries mostly make a suggestion as to what τὰ ἐπίγεια could refer to without spending much time in motivating or discussing their suggestions.

7 Apart from Thüsing (cf. 2.1) I was not able to find any scholar holding a different view.

8 See the reference to Thüsing by Brown (1966, 132) and Haenchen (1980, 221).

9 See the critical remarks of Brown (1966, 132) and Haenchen (1980, 221). Elwell (1996, ad loc.) sees the totality of Jesus' glorification as referent for τὰ ἐπίγεια. He does not give reasons for his opinion, except to mention that this is what his disciples did not understand (2:22).

10 Cf. Belser (1905, 106): "Die Taufe vollzieht sich an und in dem Menschen auf Erden". Michel (1981, 60); Wellhausen (1908, 17).

11 Westcott (1908, 17) remarks, "Here the phrase "earthly things" will mark those facts and phenomena of the higher life as a class (τὰ ἐπίγεια) which have their seat and manifestation on earth: which belong in their realization to our present existence: which are seen in their consequences, like the issues of birth; which are sensible in their effects, like the action of the wind: which are a beginning and a prophecy, and not a fulfillment". Cf. also Becker (1979,

references to the blowing of the wind and the physical process of being born are also regarded as “earthly events”. These events, that could be linked to an earthly nature, supply the necessary interpretative key for understanding τὰ ἐπίγεια. Because “these things” take place on *earth*, they can be called τὰ ἐπίγεια by Jesus, irrespective of what their “heavenly” nature might be. In short, every reference to something that “happens on earth”, whether it is baptism or examples given by Jesus (i.e. wind) or Nicodemus (i.e. birth from a mother), is taken as reason for using τὰ ἐπίγεια in 3:12.

This solution is, however, not convincing, since by the same token the references to Moses and the snake in 3:14 or the repeated reference to κόσμος and the deeds of man in the immediate following verses (3:13-21) should also be described as τὰ ἐπίγεια. This is not done. Apart from that, using the “earthly” examples (wind and physical birth) as motivation on the same level as birth from the Spirit and the reign of God, simply because they all have something to do with “the earth”, lacks exegetical finesse. These things have completely different qualitative (and syntactic) positions in the argument. It should further be asked why Jesus uses the word “believe” in 3:12 if τὰ ἐπίγεια simply refers to these well-known events that take place on earth. No faith seems to be necessary in this regard.¹²

2.3 Parabolic interpretation

Barrett (1978, 212) suggests that the term τὰ ἐπίγεια might refer to events in the physical universe “not regarded as complete in themselves but as pointing parabolically to Christ and to God’s activity in him, and intended to promote faith”.¹³ Jesus spoke in parables to Nicodemus who did not understand them. How will he be able to understand when Jesus stops speaking in parables?¹⁴ This suggested solution seems somewhat forced. If what follows in 3:13ff. is regarded as a reflection of the “heavenly things”, then Barrett’s suggestion encounters some difficulty. John’s comparing the

139); De Boor (1975, 110). Wellhausen (1908, 17) also links the birth from above to baptism as something *elementary* which can therefore be called τὰ ἐπίγεια.

12 Both Barrett (1978, 212) and Schneider (19782, 97) regard this as an important reason why τὰ ἐπίγεια does not simply refer to the ordinary “earthly things”.

13 Carson (1991, 199) calls this view “an extraordinary generous periphrasis”.

14 Macgregor (1928, 75-76) also sees the difference between the “earthly” and “heavenly” in the use of symbols, as is stated in 16:25. To speak “heavenly things” is to “drop the use of symbol”.

ἀναβαίνειν of Jesus with Moses and the snake (3:14) uses the image of “light” in a metaphorical way in 3:19-21 and imbeds the following section into the imagery of the family of God through the use of the metaphor of eternal life (Van der Watt 2000). There is little sense in saying that images do not help Nicodemus to believe, and then continuing to employ similar images in the narrative that follows. Clear indications from the context to substantiate Barrett’s suggestion are also lacking (he himself does not give any further motivation for his suggestion).

2.4 Stylistic explanation

Some scholars emphasise the intensification found in 3:12 (so, for instance, Michel 1981, 60; Blank 1981, 238; Schnackenburg 1972, 390) and even call it “*der a minori ad majus* argumentierende Bedingungssatz” (Holtzmann 1881, 712; see also Haenchen 1980, 221; Blank 1981, 238). For this point of view scholars find parallels in both the Jewish¹⁵ and Greco-Roman worlds (Meeks 1972, 53).

Meeks (1972, 53-54), for instance, argues that the description of these Nicodemus events fits into a particular genre, which was common in the Greco-Roman world:¹⁶

...though perhaps the closest parallels to the present dialogue are to be found in the dialogues between the seer and the *angelus interpretis* in the apocalypses and in the Gnostic revelations such as the *Apocryphon of John* or the *Pistis Sophia*. In such contexts, one frequently meets the cliché, “You do not understand earthly things, and you seek to know heavenly ones?” This may serve to mock the student who seeks to know something beyond his powers, or to rebuke an attempt to ascend to heaven. Only the use of the Johannine term πιστεύειν distinguishes vs. 12 from this commonplace. Precisely because the riposte is a cliché, whose function is always to administer a more-or-less serious warning or rebuke—that is, to put the would-be learner in his place—the difficulty in deciding just what are the τὰ

15 Blank (1981, 238) for instance says, “Die “irdischen” und die “himmlischen” Dinge werden nämlich nicht, wie in V. 6 “Fleisch” und “Geist”, als Gegensätze gegeneinandergestellt, sondern nach Art des bekannten Schlussverfahrens “vom Geringeren zum Grösseren” behandelt”. He motivates his remark by referring to Billerbeck’s textual evidence (i.e. Isa 55:8-9; Eccl 5:1) as well as the remarks of Schnackenburg in his commentary.

16 Meeks (1972, 53-54) mentions the following texts as relevant parallels: 4 Ezra 4:1-11, 20-21; Diogenes *Laert.* I. 34; Wis 9:16; Ignatius *Trall.* 5:1-2; Cicero, *Resp.*, 1.30; Ps.-Callisthenes, *Life of Alexander*, 1.14; 2.41.

ἐπίγεια which Jesus has told Nicodemus is not so important as most commentators have believed.¹⁷ The point of vs. 12 is not at all the contrast between earthly and heavenly information, but the contrast between the questioner and the one who possesses the information.

This approach seems convincing and takes the *Umwelt* seriously, but is not without its difficulties. As Meeks himself acknowledges, an *exact* parallel is not known between John 3:12 and the Greco-Roman material, although the similarities are noteworthy. A direct relation between the OT material and John 3:12 is also not yet conclusive. The similarities should be noted, but the existence of some sort of parallel or similarity does not automatically mean that John 3:12 must be interpreted in that particular way,¹⁸ neither does it automatically mean that it has no other function or reference in the context, as Meeks wants to contend. It is further a question whether Jesus wants to *mock* Nicodemus (an essential function of the suggested type of genre) who seeks to know something that is beyond his capacity (why does Jesus then tell him everything? Nicodemus does not “seek to know”, but simply tries to make sense of Jesus’ words), neither does Jesus want to rebuke an attempt by Nicodemus to ascend to heaven (cf. also Bultmann 1968, 105).

As will be indicated later, the opinion that this verse contains intensification is important to note. It will however be argued—with most of the scholars mentioning this intensification—that this is not the *only* function of the expression in 3:12.

2.5 No conflict exists between τὰ ἐπίγεια and the work of the Spirit

Schnackenburg states that the concept of τὰ ἐπίγεια includes the complete teaching about the birth from above, and not “etwa bloss das zur

17 The same view is put forward by Blank (1981, 238), although using different arguments: ‘Am besten ist, V.12 einfach ohne allzu grossen Tiefsinn als Übergangsfloskel zu betrachten, die in der Sprache des johanneischen Dualismus, aber diesen im Sinn eines überbietenden Parallelismus umformend, den Hörer bzw. Leser auf die nachfolgenden Offenbarungsaussagen vorbereiten soll. Diese bilden gegenüber dem bisher Gesagten in der Tat eine Steigerung.’

18 Exegetes often over-interpret parallels. The use of parallel material in interpreting the New Testament is an extremely difficult task plagued with problems (i.e. date of the material, real contextual similarity, suggested inter-textual knowledge to be proven, etc.). It should therefore be performed with great care and ‘quick results’ should not be accepted uncritically.

Veranschaulichung herangezogene Bild vom “Wind”... vielmehr handelt es sich um die ganze grundlegende Lehre, dass der (“irdische”) Mensch eine Neuschaffung durch den göttlichen Geist erfahren muss,¹⁹ um den ersten Schritt zum Heil zu tun” (Schnackenburg 1972, 390). Beasley-Murray (1999, 49-50) agrees by saying: “The “earthly things” of which Nicodemus has heard, but which he does not believe, must denote the teaching on the birth from above, recorded in vv 3–8. It is “earthly” in that it relates to man’s situation in the world and his inability to “see” the kingdom”. Schnackenburg (1972, 390f.), however, goes further by saying that τὰ ἐπίγεια and τὰ ἐπουράνια should not be interpreted in contrast to each other, but as “Steigerung”. Wellhausen again describes the “Wiedergeburt” as something *elementary*, which means that the reference of τὰ ἐπίγεια to the birth from above is acceptable.²⁰ These views, while minimizing the problem of the references of τὰ ἐπίγεια, do not seem to take the problem of the reference and content of τὰ ἐπίγεια seriously enough.

Looking at the solutions suggested above, it is clear that there is no single solution that presents itself as conclusive. What is clear, however, is that there is no self-evident explanation. Exactly how τὰ ἐπίγεια should be understood remains an enigma. What follows next is an effort to see how far the information in the direct context can take us toward a solution to this problem.

3. Τὰ ἐπίγεια?

3.1 Structurally John 3:11-12 may be regarded as the end of the Nicodemus dialogue (which now changes into a monologue), or at least as a transition (cf. Blank 1981, 237) from a discussion about the birth from the Spirit (3:1-

19 Blank (1964, 62) comes close to the view of Schnackenburg when he interprets the τὰ ἐπίγεια as referring to the realization of man that he cannot save himself and therefore needs salvation from God. This idea was already represented by Wilkenhauser (1961, 12-13) and of course Bultmann (1968, 106). Bultmann is, however, criticized by Haenchen (1980, 221) for interpreting verse 12 in the light of Gnostic literature, since the earthly normally refers to the daemonic in Gnostic literature, something which is not possible in this context. Schulz (1978, 58) also shares Schnackenburg’s opinion, “Die Wiedergeburt als der heilsnotwendige Existenzwandel, als die Vorbedingung für das Sehen der Gottesherrschaft, gehört doch nur zu den irdischen Dingen”.

20 Wellhausen (1908, 18) says, “Weiter wird die Wiedergeburt, und zwar offenbar die durch die Taufe, als etwas Elementares, gleichsam für Katechumenen Bestimmtes, höheren Dingen entgegengesetzt...” Carson (1991, 199) also seems to favour this interpretation.

10) to the theme of the functional descending and ascending of the Son (3:13-21—cf. Newman and Nida 1993, 83). This is supported by the amen-amen saying in 3:11, which refers back to the preceding remarks, but also prepares for what is to follow.²¹ With the οὐ πιστεύετε (you do not believe) in the present tense and the εἶπον ὑμῖν (what I have told you) in the past (aorist) tense, it seems evident to connect verse 12a (τὰ ἐπίγεια) to the preceding Nicodemus dialogue (at this early stage in the Gospel there is little else to connect it to) (Macgregor 1928, 75; Schnackenburg 1972, 390; Schulz 1975, 58; Blank 1964, 60-63; Morris 1974,² 222). The future tense in verse 12b (πιστεύσετε) can either refer to the following monologue (in which Nicodemus does not actually actively partake, because he will not believe these “heavenly things”—so Becker 1979, 139; Brown 1966, 132). Alternatively it can simply indicate the end of the discussion with Nicodemus²²—if Nicodemus did not believe these “earthly” things, what is the sense in going any further?

3.2 The possible reference of τὰ ἐπίγεια should be looked for in 3:1-10 primarily. However, preceding contexts like 2:13-25 should also be considered.

- First of all, the different motives found in 3:1-10, as well as in 2:13-25, should be described in order to distinguish between the possibilities τὰ ἐπίγεια might perhaps refer to.

21 A survey of the approximately 25 ἀμὴν ἀμὴν-sayings in this Gospel (1:51; 3:3,5,11; 5:19,24,25; 6:26,32,47,53; 8:34,51,58; 10:1,7; 12:24; 13:16,20,21,38; 14:12; 16:20,23; 21,18) shows that the phrase ἀμὴν ἀμὴν a) always introduces important information by way of a short saying, b) that in virtually all the uses the ἀμὴν ἀμὴν-sayings build on what was previously said, implying that the use of this phrase does not introduce a new topic or a thematic break with the preceding theme, c) that in virtually all the cases the saying is developed further by expanding on the relevant topic. BDAG notes that in the LXX ἀμὴν is occasionally the translation for ἰσθ, which is usually translated with γένοιτο. It is an “assertive particle, *truly*, always w. λέγω, beginning a solemn declaration but used only by Jesus”. John follows the double form also found in Num 5:22; 2 Esd 18:6; Ps 41:13; 72:19, which is mainly, according to BDAG, used to strengthen a preceding statement in John.

22 Michel (1981, 60) says, “Selbständig steht Joh 3, 12(-13) da: Die *auf der Erde* sich abspielenden Prozesse wie Taufe und Geistbegabung liessen sich Nikodemus ansagen, die “im Himmel” dagegen verborgenen Geschehnisse bleiben unenthüllt. Über sie verfügt nur der Menschensohn, der allein das Recht hat, aufzusteigen, wie er auch herabgestiegen ist...”. Cf. also Hahn (1970, 70).

- Secondly, the focus should fall on *what* Nicodemus and the characters preceding him in the narrative could not believe or understand.²³ Those aspects are the aspects to be considered as possible references for τὰ ἐπίγεια.

Misunderstanding (which implies some measure of understanding, yet a false understanding) is a central motif in 3:1-10 and will be considered first.

3.2.1 *John 3:1-10*

After the “status” of Nicodemus as a Pharisee and leader of the Jews is described (3:1), Nicodemus makes a motivated statement about Jesus (3:2). *They* (siding himself with the people of Jerusalem—2:23) know Jesus is a *teacher* who came *from God*. His motivation for knowing this is that only a person with whom God is, could do the signs (τὰ πάντα τὰ σημεῖα—in the plural²⁴) Jesus did.²⁵ In this way, the godly authority of Jesus to teach is established. What Jesus says from now on stands in the token of a διδάσκαλος ἀπὸ θεοῦ.

23 Although 3:12 refers to what Nicodemus cannot believe, it should not be sharply distinguished from what he did not understand, since the previous dialogue showed that misunderstanding led to incomprehension (3:10—τὰ πάντα οὐ γινώσκεις) which is then linked to lack of faith in the following two verses (3:12).

24 Jesus only performed the sign at Cana, but in 2:23 the signs Jesus did in Jerusalem are mentioned. They are clearly not described in the Gospel, but were done before the Nicodemus dialogue. This should not be regarded as strange, since John mentions in 20:30-31 that many signs were performed that were not narrated in this Gospel. This might imply a more generic reference to the signs.

25 A similar argument is used by the healed man in 9:30-33. The relation between the deeds of Jesus and His godly authority is important in the Gospel. There is harmony between what Jesus does and what He says because He only says what He has heard from the Father and only does what the Father has told Him to do. His deeds can therefore reveal His true nature, and serve as support for His message, since both reflects the presence and will of the Father. It seems obvious, therefore, that to accept His deeds (as Nicodemus does) would imply that His message will also be accepted (something Nicodemus does not do). In this sense an implicit tension is apparent in the Nicodemus dialogue, especially because Nicodemus himself has accepted the “godly status” of the deeds of Jesus. His non-acceptance of what Jesus says, implies an inconsistency in what he says over and against what he does or what he is willing to do. In 3:12 Jesus interprets this inconsistency as a lack of faith.

Nicodemus did not ask Jesus anything, but simply made a statement about Him. Accordingly, Jesus starts to teach²⁶ (as a teacher from God): “To be able to see the kingdom of God, a person must be born ἄνωθεν” (3:3). The condition for the “new birth” stated in 3:3, might seem to be repeated in 3:5. However, to see 3:5 as a repetition of 3:3 (simply employing a different form of words) is not correct, since the discussion follows a definite progressive pattern. “To be born ἄνωθεν” (3:3) is open to more than one interpretation,²⁷ as the context shows. Nicodemus immediately interprets it as referring to a *second* physical birth (3:4). His consequent explanation of the impossibility of fulfilling this condition is—according to his interpretation—perfectly sound. He does not doubt the fact that birth is required,²⁸ but he doubts the possibility of such a birth. Nature prohibits it. This is a misunderstanding preventing him from properly grasping what Jesus is saying. Believing in the new birth will therefore elude him—he does not understand it. This makes the idea of a human receiving new life a possible referent for the τὰ ἐπίγεια.

Let us explore the possibilities further: In 3:5 Jesus repeats the necessity of birth, but replaces ἄνωθεν with the explanatory ἐξ ὕδατος²⁹ καὶ πνεύματος. By doing this, He corrects the misunderstanding of Nicodemus and indicates how ἄνωθεν should be understood. A different *category* of birth is at stake, namely a birth from the Spirit. To explain how different “types of birth” are possible, Jesus contrasts the birth ἐκ τῆς σαρκὸς in a

26 His repeated use of ἀμὴν-ἀμὴν in this context (3:3, 5, 11) underlines the importance of what Jesus wants to say. He is declaring, not arguing. This authoritative proclamation corresponds to the description of Nicodemus that Jesus is the διδάσκαλος from God.

27 ἄνωθεν may mean “again/aneu” or “from above”. See Beasley-Murray (1999, 43) for different views supported by different commentators.

28 Gnllka (1983, 28) says without reasons that τὰ ἐπίγεια refers to “die Einsicht in die Notwendigkeit, neu geboren zu werden, also des Heiles bedürftig zu sein”. According to him Nicodemus does not believe that. However, it rather seems as if Nicodemus accepts the necessity to be born from above, but cannot understand or accept the way in which that is going to take place.

29 “Water” is not mentioned again in this context. In 3:6 and 3:8 only the Spirit is mentioned with the idea of “birth”, which clearly shows where the emphasis lies. In the light of the contextual link between water and Spirit, made in 1:31-34, it is by no means far fetched to interpret “water” as referring to baptism. Cf. Brown (1966, 141-144) for a thorough discussion of the baptismal interpretation of verse 5. Schnackenburg (1972, 387) directly links these verses to baptism. See also Beasley-Murray (1999, 48) for different possibilities to understand this term.

parallel expression with the birth ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος in verse 6. What is born from flesh is flesh and what is born from Spirit is spirit. The implication is clear. Birth from the flesh should be judged according to what is possible and acceptable from the perspective of the flesh. That Nicodemus, for instance, approaches the birth from a human perspective is clear from the way in which he constructs his question: πῶς δύναται ἄνθρωπος... μὴ δύναται. The focus is on what is possible for humans and what humans can do. But there is another possibility, namely the birth from the Spirit, and here the whole crux for the understanding of this birth lies. What Jesus is talking about should be judged from a spiritual perspective. The spiritual and not the fleshly perspective is relevant for interpreting the condition for entering the Kingdom of God.

A natural question to follow is, if such a birth is possible, how should it be understood from this “spiritual perspective”? This issue is explained in 3:7-8. In 3:7 Jesus tells Nicodemus not to be amazed about the necessity to be born ἄνωθεν. By repeating the misunderstood word ἄνωθεν (verse 7) just after drawing attention to the “spiritual” perspective (verse 6), the link that exists between ἄνωθεν and the “spiritual perspective” is underlined. Amazement is not necessary, since the condition for birth is possible and explainable from a spiritual perspective.

In verse 8 the “spiritual perspective” is given on how this “birth ἄνωθεν” takes place. In this sense verse 8 forms the climax of the explanation. In other words, if you want to understand anything about the “birth ἄνωθεν”, look at verse 8. Here the work of the Spirit is described as “blowing” (πνεῖ), which activates associations of a “blowing wind” with the reader.³⁰ Qualifying “blowing” with a direct reference to the will of the Spirit (ὄπου θέλει) is important, since the work of the Spirit is something a human cannot comprehend (οὐκ οἶδας) (cf. Schneider 1978², 94; Schulz 1975, 57).³¹ A lack

30 As Barrett (1978, 210-211) rightly emphasizes the fact that we have a case of double meaning here. “Blowing” can be properly used for wind and for the Spirit. One should however not choose the one or the other: “the point of John’s Greek is that it means both...The Spirit, like the wind, is entirely beyond both the control and the comprehension of man” (211). This view differs from Schulz’s (1975, 57) and Schnackenburg’s (1972, 386) view that this is a “Gleichnis” on the basis of the οὗτως in verse 8. This view goes back to John Chrysostomus.

31 ‘Gleich unbegreiflich, wie das Woher des Windes ist auch das Woher des Geistes und gleich tatsächlich doch die Wirkung; und so wenig wie die Menschen den Ursprung dieser Mächte erkennen können, so wenig können sie sie dirigieren’ (Wellhausen 1908, 17).

of understanding or ignorance however does not mean that one should doubt the reality of the Spirit (cf. Strathmann 1968, 69) or that the “blowing” of the Spirit is an uncontrolled action. No, despite the lack of human understanding, the actions of the Spirit are controlled and determined by the will of the Spirit. In other words, man might not know and understand, but the Spirit knows since these things stand under control of His will. In this way, the relative positions of man and Spirit are clearly defined. The Spirit is the one who decides and acts far beyond the comprehension of human persons.

However, although a person does not know where the Spirit comes from or where it goes, this lack of knowledge does not prevent a person from hearing and experiencing the Spirit’s presence (“sound”).³² The activated image is clear. Just as a person can hear and experience the presence of the wind, so he or she can *experience* the presence of the Spirit (ἀκούεις τὴν φωνὴν αὐτοῦ)³³ without *understanding* or *knowing* precisely what is happening (οὐκ οἶδας).³⁴ This point encapsulates the “spiritual perspective”. In contrast to human birth which can be explained in physical terms (as Nicodemus has done in 3:4), birth ἄνωθεν can only be explained as “being from the Spirit who acts according to the will of the Spirit and not according to the laws and understanding of man”. To “see” this is to look at and accept this birth from a “spiritual perspective”, in other words, to “believe”. This indicates an acceptance of the fact that the birth ἄνωθεν can only be experienced³⁵ by man without him being able to explain it in human terms (Nicodemus can hear—ἀκούεις—but cannot know—οἶδας). This seems to be the basis of John’s theory of knowledge. Knowledge on the spiritual level is only accessible through the Spirit.

Chapter 3:8 ends with the interesting remark οὕτως ἐστὶν πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος. The οὕτως wants the reader to compare this

32 Brown (1966, 131) emphasizes the double meaning here: “the sound of the wind; the voice of the Spirit”.

33 Brown (1966, 141) says that “we can see the effects of *pneuma*... all about us”. Becker (1979, 138) says “Der Wind ist mit den Sinnen wahrnehmbar” and in the same way people can see the work of the Spirit, although they are not able to explain it. Strathmann (1968, 69); Morris (19742, 220); Carson (1991, 197).

34 “To the ancients with no profound knowledge of scientific meteorology, the invisible movement of the wind had a divine and mysterious quality” (Brown 1966, 131).

35 Macgregor (1928, 73) also mentions the importance of ‘experiencing’ the actions of the Spirit.

statement with the preceding activated image (in 3:8). What exactly should however be compared? Two possibilities present themselves.

1. It could be interpreted as focussing on the *action of the Spirit*. The person will be born in a mysterious way (mysterious in the sense that the person is not intellectually able to understand it). Like “standing in the wind” he will be changed without knowing where the Spirit comes from or goes. If this interpretation is accepted then the (somewhat literal) translation of this phrase will be: “So is it with every person who is..”. This can mean that the work of the Spirit can indeed be recognized in people.³⁶
2. A second way of understanding these words is that they could focus on the reaction of the person. By translating: “*So is everybody who is...*”, a subtle difference from the previous translation is apparent. The person who is born ἄνωθεν is like the person standing in the wind—he/she will *be aware of* the action and presence of the Spirit, but will not be able to intellectually move further than that. He/she is bound by the mystery of the Spirit who blows according to its will.³⁷ This opens up another possibility for understanding τὰ ἐπίγεια. The human on earth experiences in him/herself the presence and workings of the wind. Likewise, they experience the workings of the Spirit. But if you do not realize it is the Spirit (since you do not know how the Spirit works and where it comes from) you will not believe what is happening to you. This might be supported by what Jesus says to Nicodemus in 3:11—he should know (about the spiritual things, especially the Spirit, but does not). Τὰ ἐπίγεια therefore could refer to the earthly experiences of the presence and workings of the Spirit.

Interpreting verse 8 in the latter way also puts the reaction of Nicodemus in 3:9 in a logical perspective. Jesus’ point in verse 8 that a person will not be able to understand (or be able to explain) what is happening when he/she is confronted with the spiritual birth—this confounding encounter, or experience, is part of the “spiritual perspective”, which should be accepted when dealing with these spiritual matters. This should have served as more

36 Schulz (1975, 57) expresses the view of many commentators, “Bei einem solchen Menschen spürt man wohl etwas Ungewöhnliches, Fremdes, aber mehr nicht. Das Woher und Wohin bleiben einem fremd”.

37 This view need not exclude the possibility that a third party might recognize the work of the Spirit in somebody else. This should however be regarded as a secondary meaning.

than enough reason for Nicodemus to have said, “Now I understand that this is a mystery of the Spirit which is not to be explained in human terms, but is to be accepted and believed”. Ironically enough he answers Jesus by starting with exactly the same questioning words he has used in verse 4: “πῶς δύναται...?”. He clearly did not accept the point Jesus was making. It might be that the repetition (cf. 3:4) of the words “πῶς δύναται...” indicates that he is still not accepting the possibility of the birth from above. He does not share the spiritual perspective which puts the work of the Spirit beyond the comprehension of man. In terms of the theory of knowledge, it means that he does not realize that to enter into the reality Jesus represents an act of faith without the necessity for earthly knowledge.

By questioning Jesus in this way, Nicodemus is actually questioning Him as διδάσκαλος. Jesus replies in a somewhat sarcastic way, or is it perhaps with astonishment, that Nicodemus, as διδάσκαλος of Israel, should know this (3:10).³⁸ He himself then confirms his own position as the διδάσκαλος who can really λαλεῖν and μαρτυρεῖν (3:11), because He “knows” and He has “seen”. This qualifies Jesus to “know” and therefore to witness from, and about, the “spiritual perspective”. What Nicodemus has not seen, Jesus has seen in person and is witnessing about.³⁹ The problem is however that people do not want to accept His message (3:11), as Nicodemus has just illustrated so clearly—a common theme in this Gospel and according to Culpepper one important aspect of the plot of this Gospel (Culpepper 1989; 1995).

At this stage of the dialogue Jesus says, “I have spoken to you of τὰ ἐπίγεια and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of τὰ ἐπουράνια?” Mentioning “faith” refers to the non-acceptance of the words

38 The “things” Nicodemus should know are often interpreted as the eschatological presence of the Spirit (Brown 1966, 140-141 argues that Nicodemus should have been able to understand Jesus’ reference to the Spirit as referring to the beginning of the eschatological times). It should however be noted that Nicodemus nowhere doubts the presence of the Spirit. Rather, he cannot understand how birth can be the condition for entering the Kingdom. Jesus explains to him that this birth is of spiritual nature—something which cannot be understood by man, but can be experienced. Nicodemus does not accept this either. In this light it is more plausible to understand verse 10 as referring to the fact that Nicodemus does not know that flesh is not always able to understand and must therefore just accept or believe spiritual things, like the birth from the Spirit. This is something which a διδάσκαλος of Israel should know.

39 One could perhaps say that Jesus “knows where the wind comes from” in other words, the origin of the Spirit and what the Spirit does.

of Jesus⁴⁰ apparently spoken in 3:5-8. As was already argued, Jesus focuses on two aspects in these verses. Firstly, He speaks about the work of the Spirit (i.e. the birth) that could be compared to the blowing of the wind. This comparison, in the second place, enables Him to analogically explain why a person can *experience* the work of the Spirit without *understanding* the process—this is the point of the comparison in verse 8. It would be problematic to see the first aspect, namely the work of the Spirit, as τὰ ἐπίγεια (“earthly things”), as was already argued above. The Spirit and Spirit’s works clearly belong to the heavenly mysteries. However the second aspect—which is also emphasised in the comparison in verse 8—namely the experience of this spiritual presence on earth by a human, even without being able to understand it properly, is something “earthly”. This focuses on man’s participation on earth in the “birth” from the Spirit.⁴¹

The focus on the “human side” of the birth from above in 3:3-8 also becomes apparent in the following ways, which of course strengthens the argument for this possible solution. Firstly, emphasis is placed on the ability of man, expressed by the term δύνασθαι (cf. 3:3, 4, 5, 9). In 3:4 Nicodemus asks how man can (δύνασθαι) do certain things again, which reflects his human perspective on the words of Jesus. The use of δύνασθαι in 3:3 and 3:5 also describes salvation from the perspective of what is possible for man. In 3:9 Nicodemus again uses δύνασθαι to describe his own inability to accept the words of Jesus—this is again an evaluation of the words of Jesus through human eyes. Note that Nicodemus’ reaction focuses completely on the experience of the individual. That is where the emphasis lies.

Secondly there is the use of the second person singular indicative (ἀκούεις, οἶδας) in 3:8 to describe the human reaction to the “blowing of the Spirit”. The οὕτως ἐστὶν in 3:8 refers to this “hearing” and “knowing”,

40 Note that the content of this dialogue does not directly deal with the person of Jesus, but with the soteriological work of the Spirit. (Indirectly Jesus is involved as διδάσκαλος). Πιστεύω should therefore be related to what Jesus has said, as the repetition of εἶπον/εἶπω in verse 12 seems to suggest. It is important to note that the lack of faith is related to the words of Jesus and not to the signs. Nicodemus has accepted the signs and has associated them with something which comes from God.

41 Schneider (19782, 97) comes close to this idea when he argues that τὰ ἐπίγεια refers to “das auf Erden wahrnehmbare und erfahrbare Wirken des Geistes”. Unfortunately Schneider does not develop his idea any further. Another view which has similarities with the suggested solution in this article is given by Macgregor (1928, 75). He maintains that it is possible that τὰ ἐπίγεια could refer to ‘the whole content of “our testimony”’, and discusses this view with a reference to the work of Godet.

saying that everybody who goes through the process of birth from the Spirit will experience this. Thirdly, the expression in 3:7 also focuses on the human side. *Nicodemus* must not be amazed when Jesus says that *you* (human beings) must be born ἄνωθεν.

Another point that must be considered is what the reference of ταῦτα is in 3:10, where Jesus says to Nicodemus: σὺ εἶ ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ καὶ ταῦτα οὐ γινώσκεις: The assumption is that Nicodemus, as teacher, should know certain things, but evidently does not know them. There is considerable consensus that Jesus refers to the theme that was discussed in the previous verses, namely, the presence and work of the Spirit.⁴² This includes the way in which the Spirit works in people (3:7-8). Such a view supports the general trend of the argument so far.

But what about the contrasting term τὰ ἐπουράνια? This contrast (τὰ ἐπίγεια—τὰ ἐπουράνια) in 3:12 should now be considered in the light of the suggested solution. If τὰ ἐπίγεια refers to the earthly experience by humans of the activities of the Spirit, what does the term τὰ ἐπουράνια as its opposite, refer to?

If the term τὰ ἐπίγεια focuses on the acceptance of man's involvement and experience of the work of the Spirit without understanding it, τὰ ἐπουράνια should, logically speaking, *not* focus on the human experience or acceptance, but rather on some heavenly facet(s) of the soteriological process.⁴³ The focus should be turned away from the human position to the position of the heavenly Actors.⁴⁴ This is what happens in 3:13ff.⁴⁵ Nicodemus “disappears”. The “ἀναβαίνειν”—“καταβαίνειν” of Jesus is not something that lies within the hands or competency of humans. God sends

42 Most commentators (which makes it unnecessary to list them all) in this instance refer to the references of the coming of the Spirit in the OT, for instance, Ezek 11:19; 36:26-27; Joel 2:28ff. Nicodemus should have realized the connection between these words of prophecy and what was taking place in his discussion with Jesus.

43 Hahn (1970, 70) of course argues that the discussion ends with 3:12. This means that there is no need to try to motivate the reference of ἐπουράνια from the immediate context. This view might be possible, but contextually it seems more likely that ἐπουράνια comes under discussion in 3:13ff.

44 Beasley-Murray (1999, 50) put it this way: “The “heavenly things” which have not been declared to Nicodemus will relate to the eschatological dimension of the salvation which the Redeemer brings through his “descent” and “ascent” to heaven via the cross”.

45 Cf. Becker (1979, 139) who says that in 3:12ff. the Christological conditions for having eternal life are being described. It also supplies the Christological basis for the unchristological 3:3 and 5. Cf. also Schnackenburg (1972, 392).

his Son, He is lifted up, He saves but also judges. It is not that man is totally left out of the picture, but the focus does not fall on human actions.⁴⁶ Their participation is expressed through faith (3:15,16,18). Although one can argue that references to something “earthly” are found in these verses, it is nevertheless clear that it is not drawn into focus. It is only as the result of the heavenly events that references to human involvement are made. A closer look at 3:19-21, where the deeds of men are discussed, shows that these deeds are discussed in order to clarify judgment by the Son (3:19). It is therefore a matter of *focus*. By the same token it can be said that in 3:3-8 the “heavenly” Spirit is also mentioned, without preventing the author from focusing on the human experience of the divine action and eventually calling it τὰ ἐπίγεια. In the light of this observation it is thus clear that one should not think in exclusive terms, neither in 3:3-8 nor in 3:13ff. The question to be asked concerns the *focus* from which the matter is approached. It does not seem possible to separate the “heavenly” from the “earthly”, but it is possible to approach the matter from different perspectives.

“Focus” does however not seem to be the only consideration here. One can indeed speak of “Steigerung”. In 3:3-8 the work of the Spirit is discussed, while 3:13ff. moves into the theological (i.e. the love of the Father who gives His Son) and christological (i.e. mission and cross) motivation for the soteriological process. Theologically the discussion moves from the presence of the Spirit (something which was apparently expected by the Jews) to the coming of the Son to die on the cross (something which was not expected by the Jews). This clearly represents a progressive revelatory movement from the expected to the unexpected. Against Meeks one should not regard “Steigerung” as the only reason for the contrast in 3:12.⁴⁷

The way Jesus addresses Nicodemus should also be noted. In 3:11 the addressee changes from singular to plural: ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι ὅτι ... τὴν

46 In 3:14 the “human participation in the upliftment of Jesus” is drawn into divine perspective by using the passive voice with δεῖ. Direct reference to the actions of man is found in ἴνα phrases (3:15, 16) where the purpose of the mission of Jesus is described. The present participial (ὁ πιστεύων) used here with πᾶς refers to believers in general, now and in future.

47 Note also that the reason for accepting “Steigerung” in 3:12 is not stylistic (according to Meeks) but is argued from the context. When the motivation for stylistic characteristics is taken and motivated from external documents, like Meeks does, the context should at least also be taken into consideration, since form and meaning (also contextual meaning) cannot be separated.

μαρτυρίαν ἡμῶν οὐ λαμβάνετε. The use of the plural is continued in 3:12 (εἶπον ὑμῖν καὶ οὐ πιστεύετε). How should this phenomenon be treated? If one looks at 3:2 and 3:7, the same switch between singular and plural occurs: οἶδμεν ὅτι... and εἶπόν σοι· δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν respectively. Therefore, it cannot be said that there is a change in addressees in 3:11, since 3:2,7, for instance, already contains that change.

In 2:23 a remark is made about the faith of many (πολλοί). They have seen the σημεῖα of Jesus. This remark seems very positive, but is immediately modified in verse 24. Jesus does not entrust (ἐπίστευσαν) himself to them, because he knows what is “in man” (ἐν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ). There is, however, a clear link between 2:23-25 and the Nicodemus narrative in Chapter 3. When Nicodemus is mentioned in 3:1 he is called “man” (ἄνθρωπος), identical to the last word of 3:25. On the basis of Jesus’ deeds (σημεῖα—3:2; see 2:23) Nicodemus then “witnesses”⁴⁸ about the relationship between Jesus and God (He is from God and God is with Him). The repetitions of key words from 2:23-25 in 3:1-2 are not by chance. Dodd (1979[1963], 234-235) is correct in making a direct connection between 2:23-24 and the Nicodemus dialogue.⁴⁹ According to him the remarks in 2:24 “prepare for the insight into the mind of Nicodemus”. The positive remarks in 2:23 and 3:2 (cf. faith, know that Jesus is from God etc.) therefore stand in tension with 2:24 and the Nicodemus dialogue (3:3-8). There are positive signs, but they are—according to the knowledge Jesus has about man—not enough to truly penetrate the divine mystery being revealed in and through Christ. The Nicodemus dialogue illustrates this clearly⁵⁰ and thus echoes 2:24. Nicodemus therefore serves as an example for the tension that exists in people, realizing that they are somehow confronted with God in Jesus but

48 The ironic dimension of the words of Nicodemus is already prepared for in 2:24. What Nicodemus says is true, but he does not realize what he is actually saying. If he did realize that, his reaction in 3:9 would have been that of acceptance and not of rejection.

49 Meeks (1972, 54) also sees Nicodemus as a representative of those Jews mentioned in 2:23f. See also Beasley-Murray (1999, 45).

50 In 2:17-22 this inability to really understand is also made a theme in respect to the disciples. They did not understand what Jesus was really talking about before He was not raised from death. Then they were only really able to “believe” in the *Scripture* and in the *words of Jesus*. The quotation from Ps 69:10 in 2:17 refers to the cleansing of the temple, the sign of the presence of the eschatological era according to Zech 14:21. Only after the resurrection did the disciples fully realize the meaning of Jesus’ action as well as His “word” that His body will replace the temple cult.

they do not really understand or accept the deeper dimensions of this confrontation. This is important since it opens up what Jesus said to the broader community (many who believed—2:23) as a possible reference to the τὰ ἐπίγεια he spoke about (3:12). What Jesus said at the temple in Jerusalem (2:13-25) should therefore also be brought under consideration if one looks for the contents of the τὰ ἐπίγεια.

The Nicodemus dialogue is exemplary. He forms part of the group of people (the *they*—plural) who experience tension between the revelation of Jesus and their willingness to accept it in full; people who realize that God is at work, but who do not have the depth of insight to come to full acceptance of what is really happening. Even for the disciples real depth of faith apparently only came after the resurrection of Jesus, as 2:22 implies. After His resurrection the disciples remembered what He had said and then believed His words, as well as the Scriptural proofs about His identity (cf. 12:16).

3.2.2 *John 2:13-22*

The events described in 2:13-22 form the only other context preceding the Nicodemus discussion that seems worthy of consideration. Nothing before that relates to signs done in the vicinity of Jerusalem. The Passover was near and Jesus went to the temple. There he “cleanses” the temple, *inter alia* to fulfil Scripture (2:17). In 2:18 the Jews ask Jesus τί σημεῖον δεικνύεις ἡμῖν ὅτι ταῦτα ποιεῖς. It is the use of the term σημεῖον that catches the eye, since the signs of Jesus were what prompted both the people of Jerusalem and Nicodemus to approach Jesus (2:23; 3:2). Jesus immediately refers to breaking down the temple, which he would then rebuild in three days (λύσατε τὸν ναὸν τοῦτον καὶ ἐν τρισὶν ἡμέραις ἐγερῶ αὐτόν)—this would be the sign. Like Nicodemus the people misunderstand him, thinking that he is referring to the earthly temple. The narrator then clarifies the situation by mentioning that Jesus refers to his body as temple.⁵¹ This was only realized by his disciples after his was raised from death (2:22). Then they (his disciples) believed what was written in the Scriptures and what Jesus had said.

If Jesus had this discussion in mind, the only real possible referent for τὰ ἐπίγεια would be his death, which is an earthly event. This is possible, but not very plausible. In the first place, the inhabitants of Jerusalem have not

51 See Coloe (2001) on the temple imagery in the Gospel.

yet seen the death of Jesus. In 2:23-3:2 the references are to signs they had already seen. Secondly, Jesus mentions in 3:10 that Nicodemus should have been able to understand what he was talking about. If the reference was to the death of Jesus, it remains to be explained what Jesus meant when he said to Nicodemus that a Jewish teacher should have known about the death of Jesus. At most the death of Jesus seems to be a very remote candidate as reference for τὰ ἐπίγεια.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Two of the major (opposing) solutions discussed above, namely that τὰ ἐπίγεια refers to “earthly things” in general and that the expression functionally serves as “intensification” both have something of the truth in them. However, they are not completely convincing, as was contended earlier.

4.2 The solution suggested here is that τὰ ἐπίγεια refers to the human acceptance of the experience of the birth from above through the Spirit, without being able to understand it properly. This seems to be the focus in 3:7-8,⁵² which is again referred to in 3:12 by the use of τὰ ἐπίγεια.

4.3 Finding a referent for τὰ ἐπίγεια is no easy matter, as is clear from this article. Although the possibility of two sources being mixed in this context was not considered in this article, it could pose another possible solution to the problem. The change from the singular (Nicodemus) to the plural in 3:11, and the difficulty in pinpointing the direct referent in the immediate preceding context are, for instance, arguments in favour of a possible mixture of sources. Since that is a very hypothetical area, it was not considered here, although it would certainly be worthwhile exploring that possibility at some point.

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52 The whole dialogue is implicitly involved in this way, since 3:7-8 represents the explanatory climax of 3:3-8.

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