

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

BIBLICAL NOTE.

ST. JOHN III. 8.

DR. WESTCOTT, in his valuable annotations to St. John's Gospel in the recently issued volume of the *Speaker's Commentary*, adopts the current rendering of these momentous words.

1. The Redeemer has just addressed to the bewildered and gross mind of Nicodemus the declaration that "that which has been born of the flesh, flesh it is;" while "that which has been born of the Spirit, spirit it is. Marvel no more at my word to you, You must be born again." Groping in the darkness of his soul for some glimmering of light, Nicodemus had even for a moment thought of a physical realization of the new birth. But flesh does not become spirit, nor spirit flesh. The Spirit does not work up the old *στοιχεῖα* into a new substance. It does not start (*πίθεν*) from the old *ἕλη*, and produce therefrom (*ποῦ*) a new *σπέρμα*. The creative process is entirely *de novo*. Surely this is the current of the argument.

2. Let us suppose a student with a competent knowledge of the Greek, but happily a stranger to controversy and the conflict of versions and authorities and interpretations on the one hand, and on the other possessing and possessed by a full faith in the sacrament of our regeneration—let us suppose, I say, such a student, having pursued the line of thought in the preceding paragraph (1), entering on the examination of the eighth Verse. He is already familiar with *Το Πνεῦμα*. In the context of the Verse, in the context of the Chapter, in the context of the New Testament phraseology, it is always *Spirit*.¹ There is positively nothing *ab extra* or *ab intra* to justify a rendering of the word wholly different from the rendering maintained up to Verse 8—nothing to call for a new and arbitrary rendering, which, in the close of the same Verse, is as arbitrarily abandoned. In very truth, the current of the Divine teaching addressed to correct the materializing fancy of Nicodemus, who was dreaming of nature re-wombing itself, thence to reissue spirit, is crossed by the introduction of the *wind*, a material agent, touching whose nature we are not so exceptionally ignorant as would seem to be insinuated, but of which, if we know anything, we do certainly know the "whence" and "whither." Holy Scripture itself reveals it (Eccles. i. 6). No doubt all the agencies of nature are images and echoes of the power and

¹ In Hebrews ii. 4 another version is sometimes adopted inconsistently.

outgoings of the Almighty. But of no agency is it true, in the language of the Spirit, that it acts ὅπου θέλει. So vivid a personification of a natural power is out of keeping with the guarded phrase of Holy Writ, and is half-way on to the conceptions of heathendom.

3. But the Redeemer corrects the profane curiosity of his listener, who seemed ready with the pert query of Zedekiah, the son of Chenaanah: "Which way went the Spirit of the Lord from me to speak with thee?" (1 Kings xxii. 24). So far as the drift of the Redeemer's argument is concerned, the introduction of the natural element darkens rather than clears the meaning. Having set forth the unlikeness of flesh and Spirit, and their inter-incommunicableness, the Saviour proceeds to set forth the likeness between the Spirit-producing and the spirit-produced; the likeness between ὁ γεννητὸς and ὁ γεννητός; between ὁ σπείρων and τὸ σπρέμα. As the movements of the Divine Spirit are illocal—inapprehensible by soul or sense, incomprehensible by reason and understanding, as indefinable, let us say, as the presence of Christ in the Eucharist—so is the *outcome* of those movements, the spirit-born; a mysterious reality that evades all moral anatomy, all spiritual analysis. There is, indeed, a *when* and a *where*—*when* the creative *Word* is spoken, *where* the water is poured. But in all else as He is so are we in this world, and the world knoweth us not, nor yet the abiding presence of that Holy Spirit who is convincing it of sin. In a word, as the Christian is like the Lord who redeems him, so is he like the Spirit that sanctifies him in the fulness of the supramundane supernatural life—the Christ-quickenened life of faith.

4. The introduction of the wind—the sad night-wind sighing outside—adds no doubt to the natural picturesqueness of the scene; but it mars, I hold, the continuous poetry and the Divine rhythmical perfection of the Saviour's thought. The Divine selection of a term of admittedly (in the LXX.) equivocal import, when the spirit of the Scripture had already sealed ἀνεμος, λάλαψ, πνοή, ἦχος, is suggestive, no doubt, of the earthly type—a type, it is granted, glorious and sublime; but the exclusion of such terms, associated as the two latter with the Pentecost itself, surely implies that Πνεῦμα is to be rendered strictly. Then φωνή, applied in Greek with some restrictiveness to articulate or quasi-articulate sounds, has been exalted by St. John to the highest canonization. It is with St. Luke the term employed for the unique universally-self-interpretative utterance of the Holy Ghost (Acts ii. 6). It is the title of the Baptist. He devolves it on the Bridegroom, and the Bridegroom (St. John i. 23; iii. 29), whose:

voice rings throughout the Canticles as the Good Shepherd, broods over it in his heavenly *παροιμία* (Chap. x. 4). This articulate *φωνή* (it is in the accusative case) Nicodemus hears, and—not to press the article—

The Spirit, where [it] willeth, breatheth; and *the* voice of It, thou art intelligently listening to; [now in listening to Me]. But thou knowest not *whence* cometh, *whither* goeth [this Spirit]; and so [incomprehensible by human reason and feeling] is every Spirit-born person [*τις*], *Ὁ κόσμος οὐ γινώσκει τοιοῦτους*.

5. I scarcely think the interpretation of the passage under review is a question whose decision can be settled finally by authority of interpreters, albeit if the scales were even it might be otherwise. Augustine may surely decide, in favour of the view here advocated, whatever is ambiguous in the Latin or Syriac. And the exegesis of Augustine is adopted by such popular expositors as Wiclif and the Rheimists. One shrinks from denying a reference to the natural wind, so eminently fitted, as the invisible cause of visible effects, to illustrate the action of the Holy Spirit; but I am earnest to maintain the *primary* and, as I hold, the literal meaning of the terms, while I dread accepting such a rule of interpretation as ventures to decide of itself what is or is not to be pressed.

CHARLES INGHAM BLACK.

BRIEF NOTICES.

THE CENTENARY BIBLE. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode.) This handsome volume consists of two parts, namely, the "Variorum Bible," with various renderings and readings, and the "Aids to the Student of the Holy Bible." As each of those parts has already received a separate notice in the pages of THE EXPOSITOR, I may confine myself to a very few remarks on the combined form in which they are now presented to Biblical students. The book as now completed is a very remarkable one. It presents us with the best and most recent results of Biblical research in the smallest possible compass; and those results have been collected by the patient and unpretending toil of such scholars as Mr. Cheyne, Dr. Sanday, Dr. Green, Professor Sayce, Professor Stanley Leathes, Canon Tristram, and others no less competent in their several departments. The