The Language of Regeneration

The concept of regeneration, of having a new birth or being born again, is expressed in the Greek New Testament primarily in terms that are borrowed and adapted from the natural processes of reproduction, birth, and agriculture. While some consider these representations to be merely metaphorical, having no literal meaning and just being a vivid way of illustrating the experience of conversion, these metaphorical terms convey and reflect deep spiritual realities. Before specifically addressing the language of regeneration, let us first consider the function and use of metaphorical language, paying particular attention to the references in the divine and mystical realm which are compared with phenomena in the physical, material realm.

The Function and Use of Metaphors

Metaphors are literary devices that imply comparison between two typically unlike entities. With metaphors the comparison is implicit, a comparison made by referring to one thing as another.[1] The word *metaphor* comes from the Greek word *metapherō* meaning "bear," "carry across," or "transfer" (from *pherō* to "bear" or "carry" and *meta* "after," "change"; hence, "across"). A metaphor transfers concepts between domains of semantic fields by "denoting one concept (the *tenor*) with a sign conventionally tied to another (the *vehicle*)" (Veale 2). Traditionally metaphors have been seen as merely rhetorical or literary devices not to be taken at face value; not to mean what they literally say. However, "the distinction between literality and figurality is…not a question of truth and falsity,…but a question of convention and unconventionality. Quite simply, figurative expression is less conventional, and more novel, than literal expression, which is explained in terms of the non-classical categorisation of Lakoff (1987) as *prototypical* expression" (Veale 52-53). For example, "Madagascar is an island" is a prototypical literal expression; whereas, "No man is an island" is figurative.[2] Recent research on metaphors by scholars such as Lakoff, Taylor, etc. has downplayed the rhetorical force of metaphors in favor of emphasizing the cognitive function of metaphors.[3] Metaphors are a process through which we understand the world. The "cognitive paradigm sees metaphor as a means whereby ever more abstract and intangible areas of experience can be conceptualized in terms of the

familiar and concrete. Metaphor is thus motivated by a search for understanding" (Taylor 132).

Metaphors function as a cognitive device by emphasizing certain associations of the topic or tenor over others (*Herod is a fox* in Luke 13:32; i.e., emphasizing the fact that he is sly), by enriching the conceptual structure of the tenor by analogy with another domain (*the CPU is the brain of the computer*), and by conveying some aspect of the tenor which defies conventional lexicalization (*the leg of the chair, the neck of the bottle*). Metaphors can create emotive tension by incompatibilities through the juxtaposition of images, even though the connection may not be so obvious, and cause us to consider the image for a while. In this capacity the literary effect of the metaphor may be greater than the cognitive effect. Conversely, metaphors can impose a visualization onto an abstract, unseeable quality. In this case the cognitive effect is greater than the literary effect (cf. Veale 2).

An additional feature of metaphors is that, as comparisons are made between domains of semantic fields, certain metaphors have a higher degree of correspondence between vehicle and tenor than others. Caird cites an example from the Bible comparing a low degree of correspondence with a high one:

> When family unity is compared with the anointing oil dripping off Aaron's beard, there is a low degree of correspondence: the likeness is restricted to the fragrance and cannot by any stretch of the imagination be pressed further. The comparison of the church with a body, on the other hand offers a high degree of correspondence: the variety of function in the members contributing to the organic unity of the whole (1 Cor. 12:12-21); the relative importance of the humbler members (1 Cor. 12:22-27); the interdependence of the members (Rom. 12:4); the subordination of the members to the head (Col. 1:18); and the need for steady growth to maturity (Eph. 4:13-16). (153)

Metaphors with a higher degree of correspondence are richer and cause the reader to spend more time considering. While the use of metaphor certainly produces literary effects, its primary function is to communicate a particular image and thus to enhance the knowledge of the

reader. As such, it is an appropriate device to be used when speaking of things in the divine and mystical realm.

Describing the Divine and Mystical Realm

In 1 Corinthians 13:12 Paul reflects on the difficulty of apprehending things in the spiritual realm, "For now we see in a mirror obscurely, but at that time face to face; now I know in part, but at that time I will fully know even as also I was fully known." As a result, the writers of the Bible frequently use metaphors and similes to bring the readers an image of the transcendent realm. As stated above, one of the functions of metaphors is to enhance knowledge.

> Comparison is one of our most valuable sources of knowledge, the main road leading from the known to the unknown. It comprises a large part of our daily speech and almost all the language of theology. God speaks to man in similitudes (Hos. 12:10), and man has no language but analogy for speaking about God, however inadequate it may be (Isa. 40:18, 25; 46:5)....We have no other language besides metaphor with which to speak about God....The only choice is...whether we derive our metaphors from the human realm or from the non-human. (Caird 144, 174)

The Bible employs a number of metaphors to express God's relationship with humanity such as, king/subject, master/servant, judge/litigant, husband/wife, and father/child (cf. Caird 177). In addition to these there is also reference, particularly in the writings of Paul, to Christ and the believers being the Head and Body with many members respectively, or to Christ and the believers together being one new man. The degree of correspondence varies among these metaphors. In king/ subject, master/servant, judge/litigant the relationship is objective, while in husband/wife, father/child, and head/body the relationship is subjective. For example, king/subject highlights God's authority and man's subjection; master/servant, God's ownership and man's service; judge/litigant, God's righteousness and man's guilt. These three underscore and elicit an appropriate change in outward conduct rather than an intrinsic change in nature. In contrast, husband/wife stresses God who is love and man's reciprocal love (1 John 4:16, 19); father/child, God's divine dispensing and man's divine sonship; and head/body, God as life and man as His organism. With these three metaphors the relationship is deeper and involves an inward change in humanity.

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While these images portrayed in the Bible may be considered metaphors, particularly in the sense of transferring from one semantic domain, the physical, to another, the divine and mystical, there is another sense in which the physical material realm is itself a reflection of a reality in the divine and mystical realm. We could say that the physical material realm contains metaphors reflecting a transfer of a divine and mystical reality to a physical representation, which came into existence when God created the physical universe. The physical, material things in effect then point back to divine and mystical realities related to God's relationship with humanity. Human relationships expressed by the metaphors mentioned above: king/subject, master/servant, judge/litigant, husband/wife, father/child, and head/body are a reflection of divine and mystical relationships between God and humanity. Some might say that "the Fatherhood of God is an analogy drawn from our experience. But is not the Fatherhood of God the reality of which our fatherhood is the shadow?" (Lyall 6). We could say that God is the archetype or prototypical king and father, from whom all human kingship and fatherhood are derived. God Himself provided representations of theological truths, first in creating a physical realm in which the things represented by metaphors and similes would exist, and then by pointing them out to us in His word by means of metaphor and simile in order for us to apprehend and indeed experience the divine and mystical. Indeed, we could even say that God uses these images to carry out His purpose.[4]

The notion that the physical realm is but a shadow of the realities contained in the divine and mystical realm is compatible with the revelation of the Bible. The things of the Old Testament and the physical, material realm are but a shadow (Heb. 8:5; 10:1). The divine and mystical, heavenly, and coming things are the reality, as is Christ, who is the body of the shadows (Col. 2:17). For something to be real it must be enduring, lasting, and eternal. There is a sense that the material realm is not as real, because it is transitory and corrupt. The physical, tangible, visible realm is temporary and passing away; the divine, mystical, invisible realm is eternal and abides forever (2 Cor. 4:18; Luke 21:33; 1 Cor. 7:31; 2 Pet. 3:10). The physical things are mortal, corruptible, defilable, fading, and old; the things of the divine and mystical realm are immortal, incorruptible, undefilable, unfading, and new (1 Tim. 6:16; Rom. 1:23; 8:21; 1 Tim. 1:17; 1 Cor. 15:42, 52-54; 1 Pet. 1:4; 2 Cor. 5:17). Our own human life is mortal, vain, and unreal; our hope, pursuit, and aspiration should be immortality, reality, and that which is really life (τῆς ὄντως ζωῆς—1 Tim. 6:19).

In order for human beings to be delivered from the temporary and decaying physical realm into which they were born and to obtain an eternal, incorruptible reality, the primary need is regeneration, to be born of a life that is eternal and incorruptible. This is an inward, organic change in our constitution that frees us from the slavery of corruption and gives us a taste of the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom. 8:21).

The Language of Regeneration

In order to consider the language of regeneration, it is important to consider the image that is conveyed by the words used to describe regeneration. The language of regeneration is unique and not interchangeable with other terms, such as *salvation, conversion, repentance, believing, confessing, forgiveness, cleansing, justification,* and *sanctification.* When considering the language of regeneration, the concept of adoption, as it is applied to regeneration is inconsistent with the image conveyed by the metaphors used in the Bible. As such, it is an affront to God who is able to regenerate human beings by imparting His divine life into them, thus making them His genuine children.

The Image of Regeneration

Regeneration or rebirth is expressed primarily in the New Testament by the use of the Greek word γεννάω (to "beget" or "bear"). The verb γεννάω is used fifteen times in John's writings to imply regeneration. It also is the root of two compound words in which the notion of regeneration is explicit. Even though these compounds, the noun *regeneration* (παλιγγενεσία—Titus 3:5; Matt. 19:28) and the verb *regenerate* (ἀναγεννάω—1 Pet. 1:3, 23), each occur only twice in the New Testament, regeneration is a very crucial concept in the New Testament, being the first stage of the organic aspect of God's full salvation.

Regeneration is implied in the phrases *born from above* (γεννάω ἄνωθεν—John 3:3, 7), *born of water and the Spirit* (vv. 5-6, 8), and *born of* or *brought forth by God* by means of a divine birth (1:13; 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18; James 1:18). The most crucial section of the New Testament where the concept of regeneration is presented is in the dialogue recorded in John 3 between Nicodemus and the Lord Jesus. In this chapter Jesus transferred the notion of birth to the real need of fallen mankind. First, He indicated that Nicodemus needed to be born ἄνωθεν, literally meaning *from above.* Ἄνωθεν is a compound consisting of the preposition ἀνά meaning "up," "above," as well as "again" (similar to the English prefix *re-*) and the adverbial suffix–θεν, carrying the notion of *from there.*[5] It is clear from Nicodemus's response that he understood this to mean to be born again, that is, to enter his mother's womb a second time. He received the metaphor/image of birth from Jesus but understood it incorrectly as referring to a

second human birth. Jesus then defined this birth "from above" as a birth of (ἐκ out of) water and the Spirit (v. 5)[6] and said that another human birth (to be born of the flesh) would not meet his real need. Instead, he needed a new birth in his spirit with the Spirit as its source (v. 6). When Nicodemus questioned Jesus as to how these things could be, Jesus continued to speak about things on earth and things in heaven. He directed Nicodemus away from the earthly, physical realm to the heavenly and spiritual realm (v. 12) and directed him to Himself as the Son of Man who descended from heaven and to the process of His death and resurrection to become the One who could impart eternal life to perishing humanity (vv. 15-18). In verse 31 Jesus is also presented as the One who comes from above (using the same word as the source of the new birth, ἄνωθεν as in verses 3 and 7, i.e., from heaven). Elsewhere in John's writings this divine begetting or birth (γεννάω) is mentioned in the prologue of John's Gospel (1:12-13) and in six verses in his first Epistle which refer to the believers being begotten of (ἐκ) God, where ἐκ emphasizes God as the source of this birth.

Regeneration (παλιγγενεσία) is also used in Titus 3:5 in relation to the complete organic salvation of individuals: "He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit." This is distinct from its more common classical use in Matthew 19:28, which means "restoration" and refers to the restoration of all things during the coming millennial kingdom (cf. Acts 3:21). Etymologically, however, παλιγγενεσία contains the thought of rebirth. It is a compound of two words πάλιν (*again*) and γενεσία (γένεσις) meaning "origin," "source," "birth," which is related to γεννάω "to be born." This new birth mentioned in Titus 3:5 renders a washing to the believers, as Witness Lee states,

> The washing of regeneration begins with our being born again and continues with the renewing of the Holy Spirit as the process of God's new creation, a process that makes us a new man. It is a kind of reconditioning, remaking, or remodeling, with life. Baptism (Rom. 6:3-5), the putting off of the old man, the putting on of the new man (Eph. 4:22, 24; Col. 3:9-11), and transformation by the renewing of the mind (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23) are all related to this wonderful process. The washing of regeneration purges away all the things of the old nature of our old man, and the renewing of the Holy Spirit imparts something new—the divine essence of the new man—into our being. (Recovery Version, note 4)

The verb *regenerate* (ἀναγεννάω) is rare, first occurring in Greek in the New Testament. It occurs twice in chapter one of 1 Peter. Verse 3 states that God "has regenerated us unto a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." According to Alford, "The resurrection of Christ, bringing in life and the gift of the life-giving Spirit,

is that which potentiates the new birth unto a living hope" (333). Regeneration enlivens us with God's life, bringing us into a relationship of life, an organic union, with God. Verse 23 says that we have "been regenerated not of corruptible seed but of incorruptible, through the living and abiding word of God." Here Peter indicates that regeneration takes place through the word of God, which is equated with a seed containing life. The word of God, as the incorruptible seed, contains God's life. God's living and abiding word of life conveys God's life into our spirit for our regeneration.

James 1:18 contains a thought that is similar to 1 Peter 1:23. It states that God has brought us forth by the word of truth to be the firstfruits of His creatures. The word brought forth (ἀποκυέω) means to "bear young" or "bring forth." Κυέω means "to conceive," "to bear in the womb," "to be pregnant," and ἀπό (*from*) strengthens the idea of coming forth. God regenerates us to be the firstfruits of His new creation by imparting His divine life into our being through the implanted word of life. This is the beginning of His new creation work.

These verses indicate that regeneration is a new birth which has its source out of God, comes from above, is a birth of water and Spirit, is a washing, and is accomplished through Christ's resurrection and by the imparting or implantation of the word of God. The image of birth is limited not just to the event of begetting or birth. The high degree of correspondence or domain compatibility between natural birth and the divine birth extends also to the issue of these births. The vocabulary used to describe the believers is the same as that used to describe human beings in the natural process of birth, growth, and maturation in the stages of human life. For example, believers are referred to as newborn babes, infants, children, sons, brothers, and heirs. Birth brings into being a new relationship, that of a child to its parents. In the case of the regeneration of believers, God the Creator now also becomes our Father. We enter into a new family with fellow believers as our brothers and sisters. In regeneration the believer receives the divine eternal life, partakes of the divine nature, and grows unto full growth or maturity. This new life also brings with it a change in desire and conduct. There is a desire for God's word, prayer, and fellowship as regeneration issues in a walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4), in the light (1 John 1:7), as children of light (Eph. 5:8), in truth (2 John 4), and in love (Eph. 5:2).

In addition to the image of birth used to indicate regeneration, the image of sowing seed is also used

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for both human and divine birth in the Bible. Human offspring are referred to as seed. Christ is the seed of the woman, the seed of Abraham, and the seed of David. By virtue of being one with Christ, we are also Abraham's seed (σπέρμα—Gal. 3:29). Regeneration is implied in the parable of the sower (Luke 8) in which the seed (σπόρος), the word (λόγος) of God, containing the divine life is sown into the human heart. This corresponds to 1 Peter 1:23 and James 1:18, which speak of the believers being regenerated or brought forth by the word (λόγος) of God. This incorruptible seed of life abides in everyone who is begotten of God, enabling them to not practice sin (1 John 3:9). The Lord's humanity is also portrayed as a grain (κόκκος) of wheat that passed through death and resurrection to be multiplied many times within the believers (John 12:24). There is also some development of the agricultural metaphor, although the degree of correspondence is not as high as that of the metaphor of birth. In Mark 4:26-29 the seed (of the divine life sown into the believers) sprouts, lengthens, and bears fruit which ripens and then is harvested. The theme of firstfruits and harvest also refers to the growth and maturity of God's people in Revelation 14:4, 15-16.

The Uniqueness or Non-interchangeableness of Regeneration

These terms for regeneration, drawn from the natural realm of birth and agriculture, have a rich correspondence to the experience of regeneration in the divine and mystical realm. In addition, the development of the theme of regeneration through terms such as *child, son, growth, maturity,* and *harvest* makes regeneration distinct from other terms such as *salvation, conversion, repentance, believing, confessing, forgiveness, cleansing, justification,* and *sanctification*. These terms are not synonymous with regeneration, but they refer to different aspects of the believers' experience of God's salvation. Actions such as conversion, repentance, believing, and confessing involve human agency: we turn, repent, believe, and confess. With other actions, the agency is divine: God saves, forgives, cleanses, justifies, sanctifies, and regenerates.[7]

The language of regeneration in the Bible, being drawn from the natural realm of birth and growth, indicates that regeneration is a birth, not just a judicial procedure of adoption. To translate the term υἱοθεσία *adoption* (according to its non-biblical Greek use) rather than *sonship* (having the place and quality of a son) is misleading and inconsistent with the language of regeneration and the ability of God to

impart His life into those whom He has created in His own image.[8] Birth, reproduction, and the sowing of seed point to an experience in the divine and mystical realm, which is carried out by the God of life. From the perspective of the Bible, regeneration is the real birth carried out by the eternal and incorruptible life. Human birth is just a shadow pointing toward the possibility of genuine birth in the divine and spiritual realm. God is not only the Creator of the physical realm but much more the Creator and Begetter of the new creation. He is truly a Father, and those who would be His sons must be regenerated, born again, born from above, begotten of God.

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Notes

[1]Another kind of comparison can be made using similes. With similes the comparison is explicit and is signaled by the words *like* or *as*. Metaphors and similes have similar functions as Backman states, "The simile is said to be a statement of likeness; it does not say that a thing is something which it is not. On the other hand the simile is, like any other lexical construction, in a sense always metaphoric" (20).

[2]So also Caird:

Any statement, literal or metaphorical, may be true or false, and its referent may be real or unreal.…Literal and metaphorical are terms which describe types of language, and the type of language we use has very little to do with the truth or falsity of what we say and with the existence or non-existence of the things we refer to. (131)

Linguistic statements (i.e. statements about words) are not to be confused with metaphysical statements (i.e. statements about reality). If I say that the words 'king' and 'father' when applied to God are metaphors, that is a linguistic statement. If I say that God is the archetypal king and father, from whom all human kingship and fatherhood are derived, that is a metaphysical statement; and the second does not invalidate the first. (194)

[3]Cf. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, and Taylor as cited.

[4]In terms of the writers of the Bible we could say,

Man begins with the familiar situations of home and community and derives from them metaphors to illuminate the activity of God; but the application of these terms to God establishes ideal and absolute standards which can be used as instruments for the remaking of man in God's likeness. Man is created to become like God, and the ultimate justification of anthropomorphic imagery [such as, king, father, husband applied to God] lies in the contribution it makes to the attainment of that goal. (Caird 177-78)

[5]Perhaps Nicodemus's misunderstanding was caused by ambiguity in the original Aramaic (or Hebrew) word used in the conversation. We are not sure what the original utterance was or even what language this conversation was conducted in, although it was quite likely Aramaic. An early Aramaic translation of the New Testament (the Peshitta) has the words *born* (*min drēsh*), which can mean both "from the first part," "from the beginning," i.e., "again"; or "from the top," i.e., "above."

[6]The words *of water and the Spirit* should have been plain to Nicodemus, without any need of explanation. In Matt. 3:11 John the Baptist spoke the same words to the Pharisees; hence, they should have been fully understood among the Pharisees. Now Nicodemus, one of the Pharisees, was conversing with the Lord, and the Lord spoke these familiar words. "Water" was the central concept of the ministry of John the Baptist, that is, to terminate people of the old creation. "Spirit" is the central concept of the ministry of Jesus, that is, to germinate people in the new creation. These two main concepts together constitute the concept of regeneration. Regeneration is the termination of people of the old creation with all their deeds, and the germination of people in the new creation with the divine life. (Recovery Version, John 3:5, note 2)

[7]Burkhardt further develops the notion that regeneration is unique and irreplaceable in his book *The Biblical Doctrine of Regeneration* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1978) 27-32.

[8]For the significance of using the term *sonship* as opposed to *adoption* to translate υἱοθεσία see my article "Sonship or Adoption as Sons?" *Affirmation & Critique* V.4 (Oct. 2000): 39-40.

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