



Seed of Abraham or Child of God?

By Elizabeth Van Bebber

The discourse in John 8:31-59, spoken to the *Ἰουδαῖοι*¹ who “believe in him” (v. 31), has proven to be a confusing and difficult biblical passage to exegete well. At first glance it seems like nothing more than back-and-forth (barbed) ad-hominem attacks between Jesus and the *Ἰουδαῖοι*. On top of the harsh polemic, the logical flow between these attacks is not immediately obvious. Despite these difficulties, all Scripture is God’s word to the church, and the exegesis of any passage cannot be neglected. To that end, some basic questions can be asked: *what is this discourse trying to say, and how does it fit into the bigger picture of John’s gospel?* Potential answers reside in one curious fact about the discourse: clustered here are more references to birth, children, and offspring than in any other single passage of the gospel. Why is this so, and what does this say about this discourse and the gospel in general?

Although I certainly cannot smooth over all the problems this passage presents, this paper will nevertheless attempt to shed a little bit of light on this question by doing three things: 1)

¹ The word *Ἰουδαῖοι* can be literally translated as “Jews.” An attempt to describe the identity of this ambiguous group would be outside of the scope of this essay, since it would ultimately need to address the historical baggage inherent within it. That being said, it is this author’s firm conviction that it does not refer to the Jewish people as a whole. In order to help avoid antisemitic misunderstandings of this passage, the author has chosen to adopt the convention of many modern commentaries on John that leave this term untranslated, preserving the term’s ambiguity.

track through the gospel the theme of being “born from above” as “children of God,” focusing especially on the words τέκνον (child) and γεννάω (to be born); 2) examine John’s use of the word σπέρμα (seed) and how it connects back to the story of the Old Testament; 3) highlight how the insights gleaned from the first two sections can aid in interpreting the polemic of John 8:31-59.

The Children of God

Both τέκνον (child) and γεννάω (to be born) appear together in verses 12 and 13 of John’s prologue, which is a strong signal to the reader to pay attention, because this theme will become important. The phrase in v. 12 that is translated as “children of God” in Greek is τέκνα θεού, and it is sandwiched between two descriptors of the people whom God enables to become children of God: the ones who “received” Jesus, and the ones who “believed in his name.” This effectively equates the disciples with the “children of God.” John goes on to give three contrasts of how these “children of God” are not born: “...from natural blood, nor the will of the flesh, nor the will of man” (John 1:13).² The point of these three contrasts is the same: they emphasize that it is the power of God himself, and not any natural force or human decision, that is causing these be-lieving disciples to be born (ἐγεννήθησαν) as children of God.

Beyond these verses, the two words actually do not occur very often, which is surprising given their prominence in the prologue. Outside of John 1 and John 8, the word τέκνον³ appears in only one other place in the whole gospel.⁴ In John 11, the high priest Caiaphas unwittingly prophesies that Jesus is going to die for the sins of the nation of Israel. Then John says this: “...

² All the biblical verses cited in this paper are the author’s own translation.

³ “Child”

⁴ Compare with the much shorter letter of 1 John, in which the word occurs 5 times as τέκνον. The diminutive form τεκνίον occurs once in the gospel (John 13:33) as a term of endearment, while it occurs 7 times in a similar fashion in 1 John.

and not for that nation alone, but also for the scattered children of God, to gather them into one” (11:52). The identity of the “scattered children of God” is disputed: they could be Diaspora Jews, or they could be Gentile Christians.⁵ Regardless, this short narrative aside serves to broaden the definition of the τέκνα θεού⁶ of 1:12-13 to include not only the disciples currently with Jesus, but also those who are scattered among the nations.

The word γεννάω⁷ is somewhat more common than τέκνον³: it occurs 16 times outside of John 1 and John 8. Many of these uses are referring to physical birth (such as 9:2 of the man “blind from birth,” 16:21 of a woman giving birth, and 18:37 of Jesus’s own birth), and so do not contribute much to the theme of spiritual birth. However, this word features prominently in John 3:1-10, where half of its uses occur in the span of this 10-verse dialogue with Nicodemus. In it, Jesus elaborates further upon the nature of what it means to be “born of God.” In v. 3, he says that a disciple is γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν (born from above).

Multiple commentaries⁸ point out that the word ἄνωθεν can mean either “again” or “from above.” Jesus probably meant “from above,” but Nicodemus understands him to mean “again,” hence his incredulous response in v. 4. This misunderstanding is particularly ironic when read in light of the three contrasts in 1:13: a second physical birth is precisely *the opposite* of what Jesus meant! Jesus tries to correct the misunderstanding by explaining the true means by which this new birth is accomplished: it is “of water and spirit,” (3:5) rather than of the flesh (v.6). He then goes on to further elaborate on the nature of this new birth in v. 8, using a brilliant little parable: “The spirit/wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its voice, but you do not know from where it comes from nor where it goes. Thus, are all the ones being born of the

⁵ Cf. Keener *John* 403.

⁶ “Children of God”

⁷ “To give birth”

⁸ Borchert *John 1-11* 172-173 and Mounce *Luke-Acts* 395.

spirit” (John 3:8). Multiple commentaries⁹ have pointed out the wordplay here: both the Greek and Hebrew words for “spirit” can also mean “wind.” Those born from above are, like the wind, an enigma to those who have not experienced this birth. These children are of spirit because God’s spirit gave them birth.

If the theme of being “born from above” as “children of God,” is important enough to warrant both space in the prologue and an extended treatment in one of John’s major discourses, one would expect it to climax late in the gospel. And it does so, in two places, though neither τέκνον¹⁰ nor γεννάω¹¹ are used. Johannine scholar Mary Coloe places this climax at the foot of the cross in John 19:26-27: “Jesus said to his mother ‘Woman, behold your son,’ and then to the beloved disciple, ‘Behold your mother.’” As Coloe puts it: “With this change, the disciple’s relationship to Jesus also changes... the disciple is now brother to Jesus and therefore participates in Jesus’s relationship to God.¹²” The implications of this change are enormous, and they play out in the second climax of the theme, where scholar Alan Culpepper¹³ places it. There, in John 20:17, Jesus commands Mary Magdalene: “but go to *my brothers* and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father *and your Father*, to my God and your God’” (emphasis added). These two passages work together: with the death and resurrection of Jesus, the relationship of the disciples to both Jesus and God have been fundamentally changed. They have been born from above (3:3) through the work of the Spirit (3:8) and are now children of God (1:13). What was promised in the prologue has now been fulfilled.

⁹ See Borchert *John 1-11* 176, Brown *The Gospel According to John* 141, and Mounce *Luke-Acts* 396.

¹⁰ “Child”

¹¹ “To be born”

¹² Coloe “The Mother of Jesus: A Woman Possessed” 208-209.

¹³ Culpepper *The Gospel and Letters of John* 101.

The Seed of Abraham

The Greek word σπέρμα (seed) at its most basic level refers to the seed that is sown in the ground to grow plants. However, it is used throughout the Bible in a metaphorical sense to mean “children, descendants, or offspring.” There is therefore considerable semantic overlap between σπέρμα¹⁴ and τέκνον¹⁰. However, for John the terms are far from interchangeable. The word it-self is rare in the gospel to begin with: it occurs only three times in total, once in John 7:42 and twice in John 8. In the former passage, the crowds are arguing with themselves about the identity of Jesus. Some think he is the Messiah (or Christ), “but still others said, ‘No, for the Christ does not come from Galilee. Do not the Scriptures say that the Christ will come from David’s seed (σπέρμα) and from Bethlehem, the village David came from?’” (7:41-42) Clearly, this is in-tended by John to be ironic: Jesus’s detractors are unwittingly speaking the truth about him.¹⁵ Certainly, hearing σπέρμα¹⁶ for the first time from the mouth of Jesus’s detractors creates a sense of ambiguity surrounding the word. More than that, though, this ironic truth also very subtly connects Jesus back to the story of the Old Testament. Since the word is consistently used in the

LXX¹⁷ to translate the Hebrew עֶרְוָה, which is also rendered into English as “seed” or “offspring,” it is possible to track this theme backwards into the Old Testament, to practically the very beginning of the Bible.

In 7:42, the crowds almost certainly have (among many other passages) the so-called “Davidic covenant” in 2 Samuel 7 in their minds. According to James Hamilton, this covenant

¹⁴“Seed”

¹⁵ John frequently uses irony, and this is one such instance. Some others include 3:3-4, 5:39-44, 6:14-15, 7:27,48 8:22, 9:24,27, 10:33, 12:19, 18:38, and 19:15. One very explicit instance (which is similar to the one in 7:41-42) is in 11:49-53, where Caiaphas unwittingly prophecies about Jesus, and John interprets the prophecy for the reader.

¹⁶“Seed”

¹⁷That is, the Septuagint, the (Koine) Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament.

with David contains language that is highly reminiscent of God's covenant with Abraham.¹⁸

This connection becomes even stronger when you consider passages such as Ruth 4:12, Psalm 72:17, Genesis 48:15-16 and 49:2-28, and Numbers 24:7.¹⁹ Hamilton further argues²⁰ that the tripartite covenant promise of land, seed, and name which God reiterates to Abraham becomes the means by which God confronts the curses of Genesis 3; the promise of land overcomes the curse on the ground, and the promise of seed both overcomes the curse of the woman and fulfills the curse on the snake that his head would be crushed (Gen. 3:15).²¹ If this line of reasoning is correct, then there are faint, refracted echoes of Gen. 3:15 in John 7:42. Just by using the word σπέρμα²², John invokes the entire development of this theme in the Old Testament. This will become important soon, in John 8.

John 8:31-59: Application

With all this insight gleaned, it is now time to apply it to the text of John 8. The passage itself is too long to exegete every verse; however, I will summarize some key points below. First, in v.

33 the ἰουδαῖοι claim to be the σπέρμα Ἀβραάμ (seed of Abraham). What do they mean, and why is this a rebuttal of Jesus's assertion that he can set them free? Consider Gen. 22:18: "And by your (Abraham's) seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed." By claiming to be Abraham's seed, they are invoking the covenant promise to Abraham, and claiming that *they* are in fact the blessing to the nations who will crush the head of the serpent. And if this is so, how can the blessing to the nations be (spiritually)²³ enslaved to anyone? Because they are Abraham's seed,

¹⁸Hamilton "The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham" 269.

¹⁹Hamilton "The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham" 263-266.

²⁰Wifall, "Gen 3:15: A Protoevangelion?" 362-4, also argues something similar: the curse of the snake contains echoes of the Davidic covenant.

²¹Hamilton "The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham" 258-260.

²²"Seed"

²³Multiple commentaries, including Borchert *John 1-11* 303, Brown *The Gospel According to John* 355, Beasley-Murray *John* 133, and Mounce *Luke-Acts* 480 point out that the ἰουδαῖοι's assertion of never having been enslaved to anyone is preposterous when interpreted politically. It should therefore be interpreted spiritually.

Abraham's merits cover all of their demerits.²⁴ Jesus counters back that the *ιουδαῖοι* are actually slaves to sin (as their entire history of repeated idolatry and eventual exile shows), and that only the Son (i.e. him) can set them free from this deeper slavery.

Second, it is interesting to note that in v. 37 Jesus admits that, at least physically, these *ιουδαῖοι* are indeed the seed of Abraham. However, as Beasley-Murray puts it, "something is drastically wrong,"²⁵ since they are wanting to kill Jesus, and this is not how the seed of Abraham, the blessing to the nations, ought to behave. In v. 39, the Jews counter back by reasserting their prior claim in slightly different words: Abraham is their father. Jesus, however, reiterates that their deeds do not align with their claim: they may be physically descended from Abraham, but they are not actually his children unless they obey his example (8:39-41). By this point in the narrative, the reader is already familiar with both John 1:12-13 and John 3:1-10, and ought to be recalling them here. The *ιουδαῖοι* are claiming to be children of Abraham, but Jesus and his followers are the true children of God, and this fact is proven by deeds. The *ιουδαῖοι* are naturally angry at Jesus's implicit charge of spiritual harlotry, which echoes the judgement of Hosea.²⁶ They shoot back: "we were not born out of immorality, we have one father: God" (John 8:41). They also strongly insinuate that Jesus is not legitimate, spiritually or physically.

Finally, in v. 42, Jesus denies their assertion that God is their Father. Then, in v. 44, he turns the *ιουδαῖοι*'s claim on its head: not only are they not the (true) seed of Abraham, but they are actually the seed of the serpent, the enemies of the true Israel, the children of God.²⁷ Jesus's

²⁴ See Beasley-Murray *John* 133-4.

²⁵ Beasley-Murray *John* 134.

²⁶ See Beasley-Murray *John* 135 and Borchert *John 1-11* 305.

²⁷ The duality of "the children of God" and "the children of the Devil" is definitely present in Gen. 3:15, and the fact that John adds one more duality to his long list is hardly surprising. However, it has probably been refracted through several layers of Jewish exegesis. For more on the people of Israel as the children of God, see Pss. Sol. 17:30. For the equation of the Devil with the serpent in the garden, see Rev. 20:2. For Jews labeling other Jews as the "sons of Belial" or "sons of perdition," see John 17:12, 1QM, and 1QS.

description of the Devil invokes both Genesis 4 (the murder of Abel by Cain) and Genesis 3 (the deception of Eve by the serpent).²⁸ Here, John takes full advantage of both the ambiguous aura surrounding the word σπέρμα²⁹ and the biblical story which the word invokes to create the strongest contrast possible between the ιουδαῖοι and Jesus's disciples, the children of God. After v. 44 the discourse moves into other territory.

Including additional OT resonances perhaps only serves to make Jesus's critique of the ιουδαῖοι even harsher. However, the intersection here of both τέκνον³⁰ and σπέρμα²⁷ serves to link this text with the storyline of the rest of the Bible and also helps to explain one way in which this discourse serves the rest of the gospel. John never talks about the church directly; instead he talks about it using the powerful metaphor of believers being members of God's family. This discourse further develops the picture of what a son or daughter of God looks like by having Jesus critique and expose the inconsistency of the ιουδαῖοι who claim to be God's children. By contrast, a true child not only acknowledges God as his or her heavenly Father but obeys God and therefore receives and loves Jesus (8:42). According to John, this is every Christian's story: when a child believes in his name (1:12), through the work of Christ's death and resurrection (19:26-27, 20:17), he is born of the Spirit from above (3:5,8). All those who have been born in this way can then call God their Father, and everyone else who has undergone that same birth is now their brother or sister. For John, the proof that this birth has happened is that the child of God treats their brothers and sisters as family, in other words, that he or she loves them. This is

²⁸ See Borchert *John 1-11* 305-6.

²⁹ "Seed"

³⁰ "Child"

one of the central tenants of Johannine theology around which everything else orbits. It is, according to John, our Lord's only commandment: "that you love one another, just as I loved you."³¹



³¹John 15:12

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