

Jesus and Nicodemus (2:23-3:21)

We now come to John's famous dialogues or discourses in which various characters interact with Jesus. The first character we encounter is Nicodemus. Although many of us know the story of Jesus and Nicodemus, remember we are here to excavate and discover new things. John expects his readers to observe, assess the various characters, and learn from their interaction with Jesus. We divide the passage into three parts: (i) the setting of the stage (2:23-3:1); (ii) the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus (3:2-15); (iii) John's commentary on the incident (3:16-21).

Setting the Stage (2:23-3:1)

Most English translations start the story of Jesus and Nicodemus at 3:1, but, for the following reasons, I suggest that the story really begins at 2:23. First, 3:2 literally reads, 'He came to him at night and said to him...'. The 'he' clearly refers to Nicodemus in 3:1, but for the antecedent of 'him' we must go back to 2:24, where Jesus is explicitly mentioned. Second, the phrase 'the signs that you are doing' in 3:2 is an echo of the same phrase in 2:23. Third, there is a threefold repetition of the Greek word for 'man' in 2:25-3:1 causing a particular rhythm, which most English translations have been unable to preserve: '[2:25] he needed no one to witness about *man*; for he knew what was in *man*. [3:1] Now there was a *man* from the Pharisees...'.

What do we know about this man? In 3:1, we learn that Nicodemus belongs to the sect of the Pharisees, who were regarded as experts on the Mosaic Law. Second, Nicodemus is called a 'ruler of the Jews', which means that he was probably a member of the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin. Third, in 3:10 Jesus calls him 'the teacher of Israel', in which 'teacher' is equivalent to 'rabbi'. So, Nicodemus was one of the leading Pharisaic rabbis and a member of the Jewish Supreme Court. In modern terms, Dr Nicodemus was one of the top theologians of his time.

The following picture of the setting emerges. When Jesus was in Jerusalem, he performed miraculous signs, which caused many people to believe in him (v.23). But Jesus did not entrust himself to

them (literally 'did not believe them') because he knew every human being and their motivations, and so questioned their belief-response (vv.24-25). Although the text does not indicate in what way the people's belief-response was defective or deficient, their belief was nevertheless inadequate. Since 3:1 flows from 2:23-25, the implication is that Nicodemus was part of this group of people – not socially, but in the way he was attracted to Jesus and responded to him. What was lacking in the people's response to Jesus is then spelled out in the subsequent story of Nicodemus, because he belongs to this group and speaks for them.

What bearing does this have on the story? When we realize that the story starts in 2:23, then Nicodemus does not appear suddenly, but has specific features. By placing Nicodemus in the right context, we give him 'flesh' as it were. As Nicodemus knew where Jesus had come from (3:2), so we now know where Nicodemus came from. Thus, John 2:23-3:1 sets the stage for the entire Nicodemus story.

The Birth of the Spirit (3:2-15)

Nicodemus came to Jesus 'at night' (v.2). This may partly reflect the rabbinic custom of conducting theological discussions in the evening, but is perhaps also indicative of Nicodemus' spiritual condition: he is still in the dark. His reason for coming to Jesus is that he has seen Jesus' signs (2:23; 3:2) and wants to find out more about this miraculous teacher. The questions in Nicodemus' mind may have been, 'What are his credentials?' and 'Where was he educated?' Jesus, however, ignores the hidden agenda behind Nicodemus' statement in verse 2, and instead starts to talk about entry ('to see' is 'to enter' as v.5 explains) into the kingdom of God; and the need to be born 'from above' in order to enter salvation (v.3).

The Greek word *anōthen* can mean 'from above' or 'again/anew'. Nicodemus opts for the latter meaning (v.4). The meaning 'from above', however, is more likely to be in view because: (i) born 'from above'/of the Spirit (3:3, 5) parallels 'born of God' (1:13); (ii) Jesus is portrayed as the one who came 'from above' (3:2, 13, 31); (iii) as part of John's dualism, the birth 'from

above' is contrasted with the natural birth of the flesh in 3:6 (cf. 1:13). In any case, 'from above' would encompass the meaning 'again' since a birth 'from above' is also a re-birth. So, when Jesus talks about entering into salvation through a spiritual birth, Nicodemus misunderstands Jesus, and thinks that he is referring to a second, physical birth.

In order to clarify Nicodemus' misunderstanding, Jesus explains that a person needs to be born of water and Spirit in order to enter into the kingdom of God (v.5). The parallelism between verses 3 and 5 provides clues for understanding this miraculous birth. 'To see' the kingdom of God is to enter into it, and the birth 'from above' is a birth 'of water and Spirit' (cf. the birth from God in 1:13). The grammatical construction, in Greek, of the metaphorical birth of water and Spirit suggests that only one birth is in view, in which the two elements 'water' and 'Spirit' are combined. Since verses 7 and 10 show that Jesus expected Nicodemus to be able to grasp something of what he was saying, we must look at the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) for the meaning of this birth of water and Spirit.

Two texts come to mind. One is Isaiah 44:3, where 'water' and 'Spirit' are mentioned. However, they are in parallel rather than in series (as we have it in 3:5), and hence water and Spirit interpret one another rather than functioning together. The more likely text is Ezekiel 36:25-27, which reads:

[25] I [God] will sprinkle clean water upon you [Israel], and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. [26] A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. [27] I will put my Spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

In this passage, we have God's promise that he will restore Israel by cleansing her from moral impurity by means of water (v.25) and cause an inner transformation (v.26; the 'new heart' and 'new spirit' are metaphors for Israel's transformation at the core of her being). Moreover, God promises to put his Spirit within Israel's 'inner being' so that she can relate correctly to him, i.e., the Spirit will be the inner force that directs Israel to live as God's renewed

covenant people (v.27). I understand the 'in you' in verse 27 primarily in relational terms, i.e., God will put his Spirit amongst or in the midst of Israel – at the centre of Israel's life/existence. If we then read Ezekiel 37:1-14 (in my view, throughout this passage the Hebrew *rûach* refers to the divine Spirit rather than 'breath' [contra the NRSV and NIV]) in the context of Ezekiel 36:25-27, it becomes clear that the entire process of restoration is caused and sustained by God's Spirit. Thus, God will renew Israel by means of his Spirit and this 'indwelling' Spirit will be the primary force enabling a renewed Israel to keep her covenant obligations. With this understanding, we return to our passage in John.

Against the backdrop of Ezekiel 36-37, the Johannine birth of water and Spirit becomes a metaphor for entering salvation through the cleansing and renewing work of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, the Spirit, besides being the agent of the new birth, will also be the one to sustain this salvation. The Spirit shall 'indwell' the renewed person and be the primary moral force directing her/him to live as one who truly belongs to the kingdom of God (cf. v.6b). [For an explanation concerning the non-sacramental reading of the text, see the section 'Characteristics' in the Introduction.]

In verse 6, John's dualism comes to the fore through the contrast of 'flesh' and 'Spirit'. 'Flesh' represents the realm from below and 'Spirit' the realm from above, so that the intended contrast is between the two realms. A birth 'of the flesh' is a physical birth into the natural world, whereas a birth 'of the Spirit' is a spiritual birth, which allows one to enter into the heavenly realm of God. These two realms are mutually exclusive. Hence, a mere birth of the flesh does not qualify one for entrance into salvation – only a birth of the Spirit does.

In addition, we suggested that in 3:5 (understood against the background of Ezekiel 36-37) the Spirit does not merely cause the new birth but also sustains the new life because the Spirit 'indwells' the believer. This resultant spiritual transformation, at the core of one's being, then explains the phrase 'what is born of the Spirit is Spirit' in verse 6b: The Spirit, at the centre of the believer's life/existence, directs one life in such a way that one can

behave/live as a worthy citizen of the realm from above, into which one has been born.

In verse 8, there is a play on the double meaning of *pneuma* – ‘wind’ or ‘Spirit’. The point of the pun is that, like the wind, the Spirit is invisible and outside human control. But again, as with the wind, the *result* of the Spirit’s sovereign activity is noticeable, namely, a person born of the Spirit. Sadly, however, just as one does not know where the wind comes from, Nicodemus does not know the origin of the Spirit – that it comes ‘from above’.

The implication of Jesus’ revelation in verses 3-8 is that being born a Jew is not a sufficient qualification for entry into the kingdom of God and hence for belonging to the true Israel, the people of God. The Spirit has now become the identity-marker of the true Israel, and the metaphorical birth of the Spirit is now the necessary condition for entering into salvation. This must have been shocking for Nicodemus, who would naturally assume to be an insider by virtue of his birth as a Jew. His foundations are suddenly shaken and it is no wonder, then, that Nicodemus asks, ‘How can this happen?’ (v.9).

Jesus rebukes Nicodemus for failing to grasp the spiritual reality of what he was saying, in spite of being a leading theologian (v.10). In verses 10-12, Jesus essentially points out that Nicodemus’ problem is a cognitive one; as the top theologian of Israel, he should have done better.

John’s use of the plurals ‘we’ and ‘you’ in verse 2 and again, verses 11-12, probably indicates that, in the story world, Nicodemus came with his disciples to have a public discussion in the evening with Jesus and his disciples, rather than a scenario in which Nicodemus secretly meet Jesus in the night. In the world of the reader, however, this incident typifies those who are attracted to Jesus, but are still in the dark, and their encounter with Jesus and those who already belong to him.

In verse 13, Jesus reveals his identity: he is the heavenly Revealer who came from the realm above to the realm below, to witness about divine realities (cf. 1:51; Proverbs 30:4). Finally, in verses 14-15, Jesus provides an answer to Nicodemus’ question in verse 9. Alluding to the story of the serpent in the wilderness in Numbers 21:4-9, Jesus explains that everyone who looks at him in

faith, when he is lifted up on the cross, will be saved. This means that when people understand the significance of his life-giving work at the cross and believe in this crucified Jesus, they will experience a birth of the Spirit, which brings them into the family of God and gives them eternal life.

If we recognize John's allusions to the Jewish wisdom literature, particularly the apocryphal book *Wisdom of Solomon*, we may probe further *how* this understanding of the cross and the consequent spiritual birth will come about. First, as *Wisdom* shows Jacob the kingdom of God (*Wisdom of Solomon* 10:10), so Jesus shows Nicodemus the way to the kingdom of God in verses 3 and 5. Second, John 3:12 finds a parallel in *Wisdom of Solomon* 9:16: if 'earthly things' are already difficult to understand, how much more 'heavenly things'? *Wisdom of Solomon* 9:17-18 goes on to explain that Solomon will only be able to understand the 'heavenly things', and hence experience salvation, if God sends *Wisdom* and the accompanying Spirit. Coming back to John, if the Spirit is the agent of the birth 'from above', and if this birth requires a true understanding of the cross, then it follows that the Spirit might also provide such saving knowledge (cf. the commentary on John 4 and 6). In sum, I suggest that the Spirit facilitates a true understanding of the cross and subsequently a birth into the realm from above.

John's Commentary (3:16-21)

First, there is the issue of where exactly Jesus' words end – at verse 12, 15 or 21? A bible that has 'the words of Jesus' in red print cannot be taken as authoritative – it simply reflects the particular interpretation of the editorial team behind it. I contend that Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus ends at verse 15 and that verses 16-21 are John's commentary. I say this because verses 13-14 use the title 'Son of Man', which Jesus exclusively applies to himself, whereas verses 16-21, including the use of the title 'Son (of God)', reflect the language of the Prologue and hence of John himself.

In these verses, John succinctly states the problem of humanity and the divine solution. The fundamental problem of humankind is that people love the darkness, do evil deeds and are afraid of

being exposed. The divine solution is that God sent his Son to save the world that he loves. In fact, God loved the world and its people so much that he *gave* his only Son to be put to death on a cross in order to provide eternal life. The cross is where God ultimately reveals his love for the world. As the Prologue and subsequent passages also mention, there are ultimately only two choices: unbelief in Jesus, which results in immediate judgement and ultimately death; or belief in Jesus, which results in escaping God's judgement and in eternal life.

Reflection

Our analysis of the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus has made clear the deficiency or inadequacy of the 'belief' of the people in 2:23, including Nicodemus: they had not been 'born from above' (cf. v.7). Nicodemus is attracted to Jesus because of the signs he performs. He even believes that Jesus is 'from God', but he fails to grasp the significance of the signs and of Jesus being 'from above'. Ultimately, Nicodemus neither accepts nor rejects Jesus; he shows interest but there is no commitment of faith, and hence he remains in the dark – an outsider. Interestingly, Nicodemus gradually fades out of the conversation – his verbal contribution reduces dramatically from verse 2, through verse 4, to verse 9, after which he says no more – so we are left wondering about his response to Jesus. This gradual fading away of Nicodemus adds to his ambiguity – having briefly come to the Light, he disappears into the shadows or twilight zone from where he came.

Nicodemus, then, is representative of people with an inadequate belief-response to Jesus. Such people are attracted to him on the basis of his miraculous signs, but because they only operate at an earthly level, they are unable to accept or grasp Jesus' revelation. Thus, they remain in the dark, as outsiders. John intends that Nicodemus' misunderstanding and dullness should serve as a warning to the reader not to remain ambiguous and uncommitted. Instead, John urges us to believe in Jesus – as the one whose death provides eternal life. No one can experience salvation and be part of God's family except through a birth of the Spirit. This birth of the Spirit occurs when we understand and accept that the cross is God's

solution to the problem of sin. What is our response to this revelation of love, to this crucified Jesus? Have we accepted him and experienced this spiritual birth?

In 3:13, we find an implicit warning about the futility of human efforts to understand divine realities. In the time of Jesus, some groups tried to obtain revelation about and access to the divine realm through various means including heavenly visions and asceticism (fasting, abstinence). Today, in many non-western religions and western New Age movements (the latter are actually a revival of ancient and primitive religious beliefs and practices) the same holds true. The use, for example, of mediums, tarot cards, transcendental meditation, the practice of astrology, divination, palmistry, witchcraft and magic, are all popular means of receiving revelation from other realms that are not naturally accessible to us. All these efforts are needless, even redundant, because the one from heaven has come down to tell us about the heavenly realm. Jesus' revelation of God and the divine realm is sufficient and neither should we bypass it nor have to go beyond it.