

Nicodemus: An Encounter

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INTRODUCTION

This paper offers an exegesis and interpretation of John 3:1-15, Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, one of the gospel's most memorable characters. Central to this discussion will be the significance of the symbol of rebirth. I will conclude by synthesizing the themes that appear in the exegesis and interpretation section. We shall see that the Nicodemus story offers the reader a reconfiguration of reality as Nicodemus is invited to be born again by receiving Jesus.

METHODOLOGY

I will start by briefly discussing the methodology and philosophy behind my exegesis and interpretation. Spurning philosophy most often ends not in “no philosophy, but unconscious philosophy, and all too easily bad philosophy.”¹ Broadly, this reading is primarily literary and theological. That is, it reflects on how John's gospel reveals divine reality through the vehicle of narrative. This reading is more specifically hermeneutical, influenced by Paul Ricoeur and his interlocutors. Like Ricoeur, I take Aristotle's understanding of narrative as foundational: it is *mythos-mimesis*. *Mythos*: “the active sense of organizing events into a system.”² *Mimesis*: not merely a replica of an action, but an active recreation that produces events by emplotment.³ Reading a text involves three levels of movements of mimesis: the “prefiguration” of the reader who has not entered into the text, the “configuration” that the text works on the reader by its emplotment, and the “refiguration” of the reader whose world is changed by reading the text.⁴ The aim of exegesis is to clarify the intended configurational sense of the text. The text's work of configuration is not complete until this move has happened. Its intelligibility lies in the real world, it creates a world of its own, and it makes claims on the reader in the real world. Revelation happens in the gap between text and reader, between the known and the mysterious. Through the process of interpreting and understanding, the Scriptures become revelatory, that is, a “locus of encounter and conversation between God and humanity.”⁵

This interaction of text and reader must take seriously the complexity of the encounter on both sides. The historical-critical enterprise is indispensable for a responsible treatment of the text. This enterprise is insufficient on its own, however: useful as it is for understanding the sense of texts, the fullness of those texts emerges only when they meet the reader in his or her world. Following Ricoeur, meaning is an *event*, “constituted by the dialectic between sense and

1 Bernard Lonergan, “Christology Today,” 77, cited in Charles Hefling, “On Understanding Salvation History,” in ed. Sean McEvenue and Ben F Meyer, *Lonergan's Hermeneutics: Its Development and Application* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 246.

2 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative vol. 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 33.

3 Ibid., 34. Both *mythos* and *mimesis* are to be taken as dynamic and verbal, not static substantives.

4 Ibid., Emplotment: A Reading of Aristotle's *Poetics*, 31-51.

5 Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999) xix.

reference,” between objective *what* and subjective *about what*.⁶ Activating this meaning requires exegesis and interpretation; respectively. The historical-critical enterprise *alone* cannot lead us to transcendence and mystery – a prerequisite concern to reading Scripture on its own terms.⁷

In this paper, I bracket a number of exegetical issues, such as the historical development of the gospel. I am primarily concerned with the present text as it relates to the reader. My warrant is John 20:30-31, which prompts the reader to seek revelatory meaning not in Jesus' historical person and deeds, but in the encounter mediated by reading the gospel with the aid of the Paraclete. John creates a referent world beyond the text in which the reader can encounter Jesus as Christ.

John's strategies

A number of elements in John's gospel facilitate the transformation it seeks to effect. John presents symbolic figures, such as Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, and the man born blind. Their presentation is economical, but readers easily find something of themselves in them, with their “color and depth, questions and problems.”⁸ By identifying with them positively or negatively, or by feeling pity or compassion, fear or pleasure with them, the reader is “othered,” and shares in their journey.⁹ Another important aspect of John is its language, which can be described as “concretely abstract.”¹⁰ The words themselves (e.g. light, life, and birth) are simple enough, but their meaning deepens and grows as one reads and re-reads the gospel.

John frequently employs destabilizing literary techniques. John's pervasive irony pulls the reader into the narrative, often with a wink (blindness and sight in chapter 9, the chief priests' patriotic sacrilege in 9:15, Jesus' death as life-giving, etc.). Double-meanings and misunderstanding on the part of the characters (the temple in 2:19-22, birth ἄνωθεν in 3:31, living water in 4:10-15, the way in 14:4-6, etc.), can challenge the reader to rethink his or her own conceptions of the world. John wagers that these techniques will shake the reader free from his or her assumptions so that the revelatory encounter with a new world can take place.¹¹

Testimony

John is found in the New Testament. As *testament*, the Scriptures witness to the truth of events, summoning the reader to judge the truth of their claim. John is written as a testimony about Jesus. Yet as it relates Jesus' testimony to the Father, we learn that Jesus *is himself* testimony to the Father. So it is (a) testimony of (b) a testifier's testimony and (c) a testifier-testament. Testimony: a narrative about Jesus, attesting that he is the Messiah and Son of God. A testifier's testimony: Jesus “testifies to what he has seen and heard” (3:32).¹² He came into the

6 Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 1976), 19. Since the referent is outside the text, structuralism must be excluded.

7 So Ben F Meyer on the Antiochian school of Scriptural interpretation, with which he draws some parallels to some historical employment of the method. “The Primacy of the Intended Sense of Texts,” in *Lonegan's Hermeneutics*, 99.

8 Mark Whitters, “Discipleship in John: Four Profiles,” *Word & Word* XVIII no. 4, Fall 1998, 423.

9 See Aristotle's *Poetics* III 12a and Ricoeur, *TN1*, 50

10 Sandra Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999) 27.

11 *Ibid.*, 32.

12 All translations are my own.

world “to testify to the truth” (18:37). A testifier-testament: Jesus' works, the Scriptures, and the Father all testify to him (5:36, 39). Μονογενής θεός alone can exegete ó θεός (1:18): Jesus makes the Father known in his very being. To see Jesus is to see the Father (14:9). As the Sent One (3:34) who was *πρὸς τὸν θεὸν* (in the beginning (1:1), Jesus is the testament who makes the Father's name known (17:6).

Testimony seeks to persuade and to prove.¹³ It calls on the one who hears to respond, whether as the literal judge and jury in a court, or as the reader of the gospel. In John, Jesus is on trial before the world; so too is he on trial before the reader. Yet ultimately, it is the world and the reader who are on trial before Jesus, to whom the Father has given judgment (5:22, 8:16). Jesus is a unique judge, however: he has been given judgment, but he insists that he himself does not judge (8:15, 12:47). This strange situation is possible because Jesus is the ultimate witness: by his very coming, he brings about the crisis, *ἡ κρίσις*¹⁴ which reveals and manifests (judgment on) good and evil (3:19).¹⁵ Jesus as testifier-testament demands a response of testimony: belief in his name (3:18) and confession that he is the Messiah and Son of God. This dynamic is revealed *par excellence* in Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, who is called to be born anew and to accept Jesus' testimony (3:11). The Jesus of history, the Jesus symbolically mediated in the text, and the Christ of faith are fused, as narration and confession are fused in the confession, “Jesus-Christ.”¹⁶

Symbol

The most important literary-theological feature of John is its symbolism.¹⁷ Jesus is an embodied symbol: the Incarnate Word. Following a hermeneutic logic of 20:30-31, as Jesus mediates the reality of God, the gospel itself mediates the reality of Jesus. Here I am taking a robust understanding of symbol, not as something that stands for an absent thing, but as that which puts-together (*συν-βαλλεω*) reality and/or makes a reality present.¹⁸ A symbol can mediate – or *be* – the presence of something because the symbol is part of that something.¹⁹

Because of their unique way of mediating meaning, symbols engaged in the present can point back to covered-over, primordial reality (e.g. Genesis 2-3's symbolic relation of the etiology of sin) and forward to future reality that has yet to break in (e.g. the symbolic discourse of the Hebrew Prophets and apocalyptic literature regarding the Day of the Lord). John's image of birth points both directions, drawing on every person's unable-to-be-remembered entry into the world and looking forward to the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises to his people, which begin to happen in the ministry of Jesus but which will only be fully realized in the future.

Because these symbols mediate the realm of the transcendent, they can lead into the

13 Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 127.

14 *ἡ κρίσις* means *judgment* or *decision* in Greek.

15 *Ibid.*, 141.

16 *Ibid.*, 145. That this fusion of narration of the earthly Jesus and confession of this same Jesus as the exalted Christ and Son of God gain vital importance within the NT itself, perhaps within as little as a decade of the writing of John's gospel. The Johannine epistles already witness to a proto-Docetist move that would split the confession off from the fleshly Jesus (1 Jn 4:2, 2 John 1:7).

17 Schneiders, *Written*, 36.

18 As opposed to mere signs, which point to an absent reality. See So Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001), chapter 4: symbol.

19 *Ibid.*

unknown, into an open-ended experience.²⁰ Jesus does not simply say, “think these things about God,” but “what are you seeking?” and “follow me!” (1:38, 1:43). John's symbols offer a transformative experience to the characters in the story and, through them, to the reader. In Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus, he stands on the threshold of belief but can go no further: he flattens, objectifies, and literalizes Jesus' symbolic language and thus cannot be led into the unknown. It is John's hope that the reader will do better. It is my hope that the following exegesis will aid the reader in coming to a more adequate understanding of the intended configurational world of John 3:1-15, and that the intertwined interpretation will aid the reader in imaginatively appropriating that world into his or her own.

EXEGESIS AND INTERPRETATION

Context and structure

The Nicodemus episode is artfully integrated in the middle of the first cycle of the Book of Signs (2:1-5:47). Its structure can be seen in several ways, depending on where one takes Jesus' words to end and the narrator's to begin. This reading treats vv. 1-15 as a coherent unit, while recognizing that vv. 16-21 are closely related to 1-15.

Our present episode is immediately preceded by the cleansing of the Temple and a transitional comment by the narrator. We will return to the cleansing of the Temple, which has an important clue for the hermeneutical key to vv.1-15. The transitional comment (2:23-25) sets up Nicodemus's encounter with Jesus in Jerusalem, and highlights that many are coming to believe in Jesus because of his signs. This provides a thematic pivot into Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. John 2:24, Jesus “did not have need that anyone testify concerning any man, for he knew what was in each man,”²¹ prepares 3:1, “And there was a man named Nicodemus.” We can infer that Jesus knows what is in Nicodemus. The episode concludes with Nicodemus left befuddled. However, in his next appearance in John, again in the context of testimony, belief, and judgment (7:50-52), he will at least have begun the transformation to which Jesus invites him, demonstrating a definite concern for justice being done to Jesus. When he appears the third time (19:38-42), he has made a decision about who Jesus is.

Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus is followed by a presentation of John the Baptist (3:22-36) that shares important parallels with the encounter. Some examples include an opposition between that which is from above with the earthly, Jesus as the one from above (*ὁ ἄνωθεν*) and the one from heaven (*ὁ ἐκ το(υ) οὐρανο(υ)*), and the opposition of belief in the Son leading to life but disbelief to judgment (v.36). The theme of testimony moves the reader into this section (2:24-25), is present in it (3:11-12), and continues with the Baptist (3:26-32).

The structure of our section (including vv.16-21) is as follows:

- 1-2a: Setting established
- 2b-8: Dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus
 - (a) 2-3: Born *ἄνωθεν* : the fact²²
 - (i) 2b: implicit question
 - (ii) 3: Jesus' answer

²⁰ Schneiders, *Written*, 67.

²¹ The noninclusive language is unfortunate but best conveys the parallels of the Greek.

²² I take the division of “the fact” and “the how” from Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, AB 29 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966) 136.

- (b) 4-8: Born *ἄνωθεν*: how
 - (i) 4-5: explicit question
 - (ii) 6-8: Jesus' answer
- 9-10: Transition
 - (a) 9: Nicodemus's third question, a “meta-how”
 - (b) 10: Jesus' response
- 11-21: Jesus speaks to the Johannine community; answers the “meta-how”
 - (a) 11-12: introduction
 - (b) 13-15: life through the heavenly and exalted Son of Man
 - (i) 13: *that* Jesus reveals²³
 - (ii) 14-15 *how* Jesus reveals
 - (c) 16-21: God sent the Son: present judgment and salvation

Textual analysis

1-2a: Setting established

Since there is no change of scene from the narrator's preceding comment, Jesus must still be in Jerusalem during the Passover festival. That Nicodemus comes at night can be variously interpreted. It seems to be a stealthy expediency; perhaps he fears “the Jews” and does not want to be spotted with Jesus. Given John's symbolic world, it is reasonable to understand more: Theodore of Mopsuestia offers that night “suggests the state of [Nicodemus's] mind.”²⁴ The detail also prepares Jesus' words on light and darkness in v. 19-21. From the prologue, the reader knows that Jesus is the pre-existent Word whose “life was the light of humankind” (1:4). This light “shines in the darkness” (1:5). Nicodemus comes to the Light in the midst of darkness; whether he will receive Jesus and be born of God (1:13) remains to be seen.

2b-3: Born *ἄνωθεν*: the fact

Nicodemus

We learn a number of things from Nicodemus's initial statement to Jesus. First, he regards him as a rabbi and a teacher. “Rabbi” is used to address Jesus seven times in John (all in the Book of Signs),²⁵ first by disciples of John who then become Jesus' own disciples (1:38f), other times by his disciples as a group. “Teacher” is also used of Jesus elsewhere; in fact, he uses it approvingly of himself (13:13-14).²⁶ The syntax stresses that Nicodemus regards Jesus as having come from God.²⁷ Thus far, Nicodemus is on solid ground.

The basis of Nicodemus's statement is that Jesus does signs which are only possible if God is present with him. Reliance on Jesus' signs may put Nicodemus in the same category as those in 2:24. Yet Jesus himself will twice point to his signs as *the* evidence of his true identity

23 I take the division of “that” and “how” from Moloney, 95.

24 Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. Maco Conti (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2010) 33.

25 Though Mary will call him *Rabbouni* at the first resurrection appearance, 20:16.

26 The only possibly negative or ironic use of *didaskalos* in John is in 8:4, which I ignore as it comes from non-Johannine material.

27 “Rabbi, we know that *from God* you have come, a teacher...”

(5:36; 10:25). Nicodemus's limited knowledge is leading him toward the light.²⁸ Thus far, he has understood that God is with Jesus, but not that Jesus was in the beginning with God.

Jesus

Jesus' response has the feel of solemn testimony: he begins with *Amen, amen* (so too in v. 5 and 11) and adds “I say to you” before stating his response. It is impossible to render Jesus' words “born again from above” adequately, as *ἀνωθεν* can mean simply the temporal “again,” but also the spatial (or here, *spiritual*) “from above.” Jesus intends both meanings at once. We must hear this double meaning to understand Jesus aright. As O'Day argues, the double meaning “underscores that the newness of which Jesus speaks cannot be contained or comprehended by any simple or preexistent categories. He speaks of a newness that challenges even the conventional capacity of language.”²⁹ I would add to this that Jesus' use of the symbol of birth allows for greater pregnancy of meaning than would be available if Jesus were to use a simple propositional statement, such as “you must be fundamentally changed.”

These verses contain the only occurrence of the phrase Kingdom of God in John's gospel. *Seeing* the Kingdom must be taken as a loose metaphor meaning “to experience, encounter, participate in,”³⁰ or as the parallel verse 5 will have it, “enter into.” The precise meaning of “the Kingdom of God” is elusive. In the light of 3:6 and 1:12, it would be a place where the Spirit is present and the will of God is done. Since the Kingdom was part of early Jesus tradition, it could be a metaphor that has already become traditional and that needs no explanation. This is behind O'Day's reading, which holds that Jesus combines two metaphors here, one traditional (the Kingdom), and one new (born *ἀνωθεν*) to “speak of a newness of life.”³¹

(b) 4-8: Born *ἀνωθεν*: the how

(i): Nicodemus

Nicodemus has understood only the temporal element of *ἀνωθεν* and nothing of its spiritual sense. This is clear both from his confusion and his use of *δεύτερον*, “a second time,” for “again”; the word is unambiguously temporal. Nicodemus's present categories of (im)possibility resist Jesus' offer of life, so Jesus renews his efforts.

This confusion allows for Nicodemus to hint at more than he knows: “how can one re-enter his mothers' *κοιλία*?” he asks. The obvious sense here is womb; however, *κοιλία* can also refer to the depths of one's person, one's heart. The only other use of this word in John is in 7:38, “rivers of living water shall flow from his heart.”³² It is unclear whether this is the *κοιλία* of Jesus or the believer, but either way (or, *both* ways) the result is that believers will receive the Spirit (7:39). Thus rebirth is not through re-entering the mother's *κοιλία*, but being born of the Spirit (v.5). Being born again could mean receiving the living water of the Spirit which flows from Jesus' *κοιλία*, perhaps with the result that these living waters / the Spirit then flows from the

28 Pace Bishop and Moloney, who take him to be trapped in “definitions' he 'knows too exactly.” Francis Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, SP 4 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998) 91.

29 Gail O'Day, “New Birth as a New People: Spirituality and Community in the Fourth Gospel,” *Word & World* vol VIII, no 1, 56.

30 Brown, *Gospel According to John*, 130.

31 O'Day, “New Birth” 56.

32 Interestingly enough, this is just before Nicodemus's second appearance in 7:50.

believer.

(ii) *Jesus' answer*

Jesus' answer here is initially parallel to v.3 but greatly expands it. Jesus first restates his earlier words, but changes “born again / from above” to “born of water and Spirit” and “enter into” to “see.” Jesus changes his words in an effort to help Nicodemus. For the reader, the prologue can shed further light on the matter of birth. 1:12-13 indicate that to be born of God is to be a child of God. To be a child of God is a result of believing in or receiving Jesus. Understanding a parallel with the birth language in 3:3-7 implies a close connection between (a) receiving and believing in Jesus with (b) being born *ἄνωθεν*, of water and Spirit, and thus seeing and entering into the Kingdom. Of course, Nicodemus had not read the prologue to the gospel. Did Jesus give him another clue?

Schneiders proposes one: a literal understanding of being born of water. Water breaking is a sign of immanent childbirth. Nicodemus would quite reasonably have believed himself a member of God's covenant people on the basis of his birth. John's Jesus, however, regards being a child of Abraham as inadequate to “judge religious reality,” and indeed for salvation (c.f. 8:33-40).³³ Thus, Jesus would be saying one must not only be born (according to the flesh) into the covenant people, but also be born (according to the spirit) *ἄνωθεν* in the Spirit.

We also have recourse to the OT as we try to understand Jesus' words. While the clearest referent of this new birth in the Johannine community (and for later Christian readers) is baptism, this would be an anachronism in the narrative.³⁴ O'Day argues that this passage is comprehensible in terms of the OT: “the outpouring of the Spirit as a sign of new life in the new age is a frequent image” (e.g. Joel 2:28-29 and Isa 32:15).³⁵ Similarly, the water-Spirit combination is in Ezek 36:25-26 and Isa 44:3.³⁶ Therefore, O'Day writes, Jesus is using traditional images, gleaning from the known to move to the new.³⁷

These hints may have been intended to help Nicodemus, but their references remain somewhat remote. If Jesus had intended Nicodemus to catch them, Nicodemus would have been greatly helped by evidence of another part of the prophecies being fulfilled, such as a great abundance of food, for example. He is, unfortunately, three chapters too early for the feeding of the five thousand. Isaiah 44 includes the imagery of God forming Israel in the womb, which may add to its echoes. Again, the reference would be stronger with another link; again, it is yet to come. Along with the pairing of water and Spirit in Isa 44:3, there are three references to Jacob: all key terms in John 4. If Jesus intended Nicodemus to draw any conclusions from his references to OT themes, they were too veiled for Nicodemus to reap any benefit.

Given that the passages possibly alluded to in the OT and the episodes in John which I have identified as possibly relevant, Jesus would be subtly pointing Nicodemus towards seeing (or, John would be subtly pointing the reader towards seeing) the beginning of a new age, the fulfillment of God's covenant with Israel (this all the more given the passage's setting: Passover). Jesus' words suggest that God's promise to cleanse his people with water and pour out the Spirit are being fulfilled. However, this remains a suggestion. At this point, the reader is invited to

33 Schneiders, *Witten*, 121.

34 O'Day, “New Birth” 57.

35 *Ibid.*, 57.

36 *Ibid.*, 57.

37 *Ibid.*, 57-58.

journey with Nicodemus in seeking to understand Jesus and his testimony to heavenly things (3:11-12). Nicodemus is called to recognize a world which the flesh and senses can perceive but not understand. So it is with the wind, whose presence is indubitable, but which remains beyond human control. Nicodemus and the reader have some clues here, but still need the hermeneutic key.

9-10: Transition: Nicodemus's "meta-how"; Jesus' response

Despite Jesus' efforts to open Nicodemus's eyes, Nicodemus remains nonplussed. He does not reject what Jesus tells him, but rather fails to understand what Jesus could be saying. What is any of this about? Nicodemus would be hard pressed to understand Jesus' words: he still does not have the key which Jesus will shortly provide. Jesus' initial response is to chide Nicodemus. We perhaps glimpse the Johannine community's view of those who, they feel, ought to have understood already. There is great irony as Nicodemus the "teacher of Israel" and "ruler of the Jews" is unable to grasp even earthly things, let alone heavenly things.³⁸

11-16: Jesus speaks to the Johannine community; answers the "meta-how"

(a) 11-12: introduction

These two verses form a transition from the narrated dialogue of 3:1-10 to Jesus' discourse in 13-15 (or 13-21). Jesus' words transition from "I" to "we"; it seems that "the community of Jesus speaks to Israel"³⁹ through him. As they testify to what they have seen, the *martyres*, witnesses, become rejected martyrs. But what have they seen? This does not fit anything Jesus has just said, and makes the most sense as words from the Johannine community bearing testimony to Jesus. These sentences also contain the first occurrence in the gospel of *lalein*, John's "verb *par excellence* for Jesus' revelation of the truth from God."⁴⁰ This highlights the importance of the heavenly things that are to follow.

(b) 13-15: life through the heavenly and exalted Son of Man

Jesus now comes to the point of what he has been saying. Ironically, Nicodemus's question is answered only as he "fades off into the darkness whence he came."⁴¹

(i) that Jesus reveals

Verse 13 gives the basis for Jesus' earlier words to Nicodemus: he is the unique heavenly revealer of God. Jesus dismisses those figures, such as Enoch, depicted in intertestamental Jewish literature as making heavenly journeys: "*no one* has gone up [... but] the Son of Man." Because he alone has come down from heaven, he alone is qualified to reveal heavenly reality.

From 20:30-31 we can infer that "to seek perfect chronological sequence in John is a vain

38 This irony is heightened in the light of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, discussed below.

39 Moloney, *Gospel of John*, 94.

40 Brown, *Gospel According to John*, 132.

41 *Ibid.*, 144.

endeavor.”⁴² Thus we will not reflect on the temporal difficulties in v.13 (i.e. that the Son of Man *has gone up* already), or the question of to what extent Jesus and the narrator, respectively, are the speaker. If anything, their voices are intertwined. John would not seek to draw a hard line between the earthly Jesus and the glorified Jesus. The earthly Jesus is the Incarnate Word, the glorified Jesus still bears the wounds of the Cross, and (as argued above) there is a single confessed Jesus for John: Jesus-Christ.

(ii) 14-15 how *Jesus reveals*

Jesus finally answers Nicodemus's question (v.9). Jesus' words again refer Nicodemus to the OT, this time to a specific passage, Numbers 21:4-9. Significantly, he changes the verb: in both the LXX and MT, Moses *puts* or *places* (εστησεν) the serpent on a pole. In John, he *lifts up* (ὕψωθηναι) the serpent. The use of this verb is significant on at least two sequential levels, first in the world of the OT, second in John. The multiple levels of meaning are made possible by the word's polysemy, which can mean both “to (physically) lift up” and “to exalt.”⁴³

If Nicodemus's knowledge of Scripture were as good as Paul's seems to have been – that is, if he had the LXX memorized – he perhaps would have heard the indirect reference to Isa 52:13⁴⁴ embedded in Jesus' direct reference to Numbers. The implications would be too great for Nicodemus to realize at once, but given that his next direct interaction with Jesus (Jesus' body, at least) will be at the crucifixion,⁴⁵ perhaps it is not too much to assume that he meditated on Jesus' words. This servant song (Isa 52:13-53:12)⁴⁶ speaks of God's innocent servant who would be rejected and whose suffering would lead to healing and righteousness for others.⁴⁷

This is the first of three statements concerning the lifting up of the Son of Man in John. In 8:28, Jesus foretells his death, stressing his relationship to the Father as marked by obedience and close identity (“you will realize that I AM”). In 12:32-34, Jesus indicates the universal scope of importance of his death, and his interlocutors understand that he means his death. These are the equivalent of the “passion pointers” in the synoptic gospels.⁴⁸

Verses 14-15 give the interpretive key for the entire Nicodemus encounter: *as the one who has ascended, Jesus can bestow the Spirit.*⁴⁹ They also say how he can reveal: *the Spirit is given in his “lifting up,” his crucifixion-exaltation, and received by belief in him.* It is through Jesus' crucifixion and ascension to the Father, which includes his gift of the Spirit, that one may be born of the Spirit. To believe in Jesus is to have eternal life, that is, the life of those born of the Spirit. This is confirmed by later Johannine material: “All who believe that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God” (1 Jn 5:1a). Prosaic propositions have a more immediate clarity than symbolic narrative, but the price of this clarity is a loss of symbolic and intertextual richness –

42 Brown, *Gospel According to John*, 135.

43 Brown finds this strengthened by the polysemy of the Hebrew *nashah*, lift up, which in Joseph's dream interpretation means glorification for the cupbearer (whose head will be lifted *up*) and death for the baker (whose head will be lifted *off*) in Gen 40.

44 “Look! See, my servant shall be lifted up and exceedingly glorified,” or “Look, my servant shall be looked at, he shall be high and lifted up very high.” The exact original sense would depend on the (Aramaic?) original words. My second translation takes the hiphil of *shakal* as “looked at,” rather than the NRSV's ‘prosper,’ according to the context of John's argument.

45 Indeed, at the tomb – more poignant in the light of Isa 53:9.

46 Which Nicodemus would not, of course, have known as a “servant song,” a modern scholarly convention.

47 Interestingly, this servant song is directly followed in Isaiah by a metaphor involving birth.

48 e.g. Mk 8:31; 9:31; 10:33, 45, etc.

49 Jesus as the one who gives the Spirit becomes a theme in John; see , 14:16, 26; 15:26, and especially 16:7.

and thus meaning.

Before concluding this section, I will make explicit what I have taken to be the clue that v.14-15 is the key to this encounter. This passage has a structural similarity to the preceding episode, Jesus' symbolic action at the temple (having driven both vendors and animals out of the Temple, Jesus is questioned and makes a statement about the destruction and raising of "this temple").

2:18 prompt to Jesus	3:2 prompt to Jesus
2:19 statement by Jesus	3:3: statement by Jesus
2:20 misunderstanding of Jesus' words	3:4 misunderstanding
2:21-22 Explanation: the cross and resurrection form the hermeneutical key	3:4 (=) prompt to Jesus
	3:5-8 explanation = restatement by Jesus
	3:9: misunderstanding of Jesus' words
	3:11-15 Explanation: the cross and resurrection form the hermeneutical key

The structures of the two encounters are quite similar, though the Nicodemus encounter has a doubled misunderstanding and a lengthier explanation. Unfortunately for Jesus' interlocutors, the key to understanding would be a future event.

What could Nicodemus have understood? We saw above that there was some OT thematic background for Jesus' statements on water and the Spirit. The canonical OT has very little regarding God begetting sons, though God can refer to Israel as his firstborn (Ex 4:22). Postexilic literature has "pious individual Israelites designated as sons of God," e.g. Wis 5:5, Ps Sol 17:30.⁵⁰ Altogether, Nicodemus could have been able to perceive "that Jesus was proclaiming the arrival of the eschatological times" when God's Spirit would be given to his people and, perhaps, "when men would be God's children."⁵¹ How much did Nicodemus actually understand?

Nicodemus— born anew?

John clearly intends Nicodemus to be an example of partial faith at this point in the gospel. The reader can sympathize with him; he is "suspended" between the gung-ho Nathanael and the Samaritan woman.⁵² Does he remain in darkness, or is this encounter "the last hour before the dawn of hope"?⁵³

Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus's "parallel opposite," the Samaritan woman, sheds light on Nicodemus and rebirth. The contrast of the two characters could hardly be greater: man and woman, Jew and Samaritan, faithful and apostate, ruler and slave.⁵⁴ Both meetings are scandalous: Nicodemus furtively meets with a Galilean upstart; Jesus openly meets with the woman. Jesus engages them both; this juxtaposition signals "a radical subversion of the

50 Brown, *Gospel According to John*, 139.

51 Ibid.

52 Schneiders, *Written*, 118.

53 Whitters, "Discipleship," 424.

54 Munro argues cogently that this woman, being neither a prostitute nor married, would most likely be either a slave or a concubine. Winsome Munro, "The Pharisee and the Samaritan in John: Polar or Parallel?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 57, 1995. 717.

prevailing social hierarchy, based as it was on birth, ethnicity, caste, and gender.”⁵⁵ John gives the reader a picture of the Kingdom, of those who have been born of the Spirit and imbibed the living water: the ruler is humbled and the lowly one is lifted up.⁵⁶ Identity is radically reworked by membership in the reborn family gathered by Jesus and the Spirit.⁵⁷

John 19:38-42 relates Jesus' burial by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who received Jesus' body from Pilate and give him a king's burial.⁵⁸ Two subtle points show forth the significance of this action. Nicodemus never verbally gives expression to believing in Jesus. However, neither does Mary of Bethany, who is clearly presented as among those who believe. We see her faith in her actions as she anoints Jesus' feet (12:3, 7). It is appropriate to see both characters, connected by their myrrh-offering, as expressing their faith in their actions.⁵⁹ The Samaritan woman likewise expressed her faith in actions, bringing others to Jesus, just as Jesus commissioned the recognized apostles to do (4:28-42).⁶⁰

Our greatest proof that Nicodemus came to belief in Jesus is a single word: he literally receives Jesus from Pilate (19:40).⁶¹ This verb, *λαμβάνειν*, has a rich significance in John's gospel. “No man can receive anything unless it is given him from heaven” (3:27). *Man* would better be translated *person*, but I mean to recall our attention to 2:25-3:1, where Nicodemus is introduced as “a man from the Pharisees.” In 5:43, Jesus testifies that he has come in his Father's name, but his interlocutors (“the Jews”) do not receive him. Those who do receive Jesus, however, also receive the One who sent him (13:20b). Earlier we saw the use of *κοιλια* in the Nicodemus story. The term *κοιλια* joins the theme of belief and drinking water from the episode with the Samaritan woman in 7:38. John relates this to the Spirit, which would be given when Jesus was glorified (7:39). Believers receive the Spirit when living waters flow from Jesus' side (19:34), a detail highlighted by the solemn testimony given to it (19:35). Receiving has a biting irony in 19:1, 6, as Pilate mocks the arch-priests, telling them to receive Jesus. In 3:11, Jesus speaks for the Johannine community in saying “You do not receive our testimony.” Finally, we have the words of the prologue: “But to as many as received [Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born not by blood or the will of flesh or the will of man, but by God” (1:12-13).

Nicodemus is vindicated as he receives Jesus. In doing so, he proves that he has received the One sent from above, the One who sent Jesus, has drunk the living water flowing from Jesus' heart, has received the Spirit, and has become a child born of God.

CONCLUSIONS

Discipleship and Community

There is a double individual-corporate dialectic in being born *ἄνωθεν* / of water and

55 Ibid., 712.

56 This is also seen in Nicodemus's confusion being juxtaposed with the Samaritan woman's sophisticated knowledge of the Torah and the Samaritan tradition. Her dialog shows that it is *she* who is the teacher of her people!

57 This bears clear similarities to Gal 3:28-29.

58 A king's burial: beside the prodigal quantity of spices, he was laid in a new tomb, rather than a mausoleum.

59 Munro, “Pharisee and the Samaritan,” 726.

60 Ibid., 726.

61 Ibid., 727.

Spirit. This birth is first individual, in that each person must receive Jesus (=believe his testimony) for him- or herself, and secondly corporate in that these people are gathered together as God's children. On the other hand, it is first corporate because the creation and gathering of God's children through the work of the Spirit and the Son-Servant is the fulfillment of God's promises to his covenant people Israel. In this Spirited fulfillment, God creates a family in which he is Father and all are brothers and sisters. In this sense, individual birth is secondary: one is born into a family of covenantal promise, and individuals can be born into it, opposed to it, befuddled by it, or something in between.

Nicodemus' invitation to discipleship is in the mode of "follow me!" To receive Jesus, Nicodemus must take his partial faith to the Cross. Lifted up, Jesus gives life and pours out the Spirit. As streams of living water flow from his heart, the heavenly reality of God is fully exposed. Exalted there, Jesus can be received as the life-giving Christ.

John's appeal

To return to a point made at the outset, any adequate interpretation of Scripture must take account of its movement to the reader. The text's poetic power corresponds to the reader's power of imagination, which allows the reader to encounter the text's appeal to re-imagine the world.⁶² John creates a world in which God is acting, pouring out the Spirit in Jesus creating a new family of those born of God. This is the object of interpretation. The corresponding task for the interpreting subject, or reader, is appropriation: receiving from the text a proposed way of existing, which here is as one born of God.⁶³ In John's world, the reader is at no disadvantage in this quest compared to the people who knew the earthly Jesus. There is a basic equation between receiving Jesus and believing in him; we see this literarily with Nicodemus and grammatically with the apposition in 1:12 that equates those who receive Jesus with those who believe in his name. Receiving Jesus after his return to the Father is made possible by this equation, as well as by Jesus' identity as testifier-testament. As Word and Testament to the Father, Jesus can be received wherever his testimony is proclaimed.

John's gospel was written not just that the reader might know the things Jesus did, but come to believe in him (20:30-31). The reader's ultimate questions for the text should therefore not be *did this happen?*, but rather *how can this happen for me?* In our present case, that question becomes *how can I do the truth and come to testify to Jesus and be born of God?* Constitutive of Nicodemus's path to Jesus was doing the truth. We see this in 7:50-51 as he risks being ostracized by speaking in favor of a fair trial for Jesus. We see it more strongly in 19:38-42 as he gives a royal burial to the Exalted One who was enthroned on the Cross. Enveloping the entire gospel is another means of doing the truth: testifying to Jesus, the way, the truth and the light (1:7; 21:24).

62 Ibid., 117.

63 Ricoeur, *Essays*, 108.