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Theological Complexity and the Characterisation of Nicodemus in John's Gospel

Craig R. Koester

Characterisation is 'the art and techniques by which an author fashions a convincing portrait of a person within a more or less unified piece of writing.'¹ The portrait emerges through what the narrator says about a person, through the person's own words and actions, and through the way that others in the story respond to the person. A major feature of characterisation in the Fourth Gospel is the depiction a person's relationship to Jesus. The way the writer carries out this task fits the overall purpose of the gospel itself. The writer tells of people in the story encountering Jesus in order that the readers themselves may 'believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,' and that through believing they might 'have life in his name' (20:31).

The gospel's apparently simple statement of purpose, however, masks the theological complexity of the writer and the implications for our understanding of characterisation. One might expect the gospel to offer a clear set of alternatives, encouraging readers to emulate the people who respond positively to Jesus and to repudiate those who respond negatively. But in practice, the alternatives are not so clear-cut. Nicodemus is perhaps the most notable example of a character who confounds easy categorization, so that interpreters sometimes consider him a positive figure and sometimes a negative one. More importantly, the gospel's theological perspective assumes that faith is engendered through the activity of God, who sends the Son into the world. Accordingly, character portrayal not only deals with the way that people respond to each other but the way that God interacts with human beings.

Dualism and the Problem of Ambiguity

Studies of Nicodemus often point out that the gospel works with a dualistic worldview, which is prominent in the Nicodemus's initial encounter with Jesus (3:1-21). The passage refers to God and the world, to the heavenly realm above and the earthly realm below. It contrasts Spirit with flesh, light with darkness, belief with unbelief, and life with perishing.² The sharp dichotomies seem to

¹ R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 105.

² Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 104; Gabi Renz, 'Nicodemus: An Ambiguous Disciple? A Narrative Sensitive Investigation,' in John Lierman (ed.) *Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John* (WUNT 2/219; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), pp. 255-83, esp. p. 255.

invite readers to place Nicodemus in one category or the other, and yet doing so is not simple because the gospel provides ‘mixed signals’ about Nicodemus’s character.³

Nicodemus comes to Jesus and calls him a teacher who has come from God, which seems positive, and yet he arrives during the night and fails to comprehend what Jesus tells him about new birth, which seems negative (3:1-10). Later the Jewish authorities want to arrest Jesus, and Nicodemus points out the need to give someone a hearing before passing judgment, which again seems positive; and yet he stops without making a statement of faith, which can be seen as negative (7:50-51). At the end of the gospel Nicodemus entombs the body of Jesus with a hundred pounds of spice, which seems to be a gesture of honour, and yet readers are reminded that he first came to Jesus by night; and Nicodemus is assisted at the burial with someone who kept his faith in Jesus a secret (19:38-42). So what are readers to make of that?

Literary studies sometimes work with the idea that characters are ‘particular sorts of choosers,’ and given ‘the pervasive dualism of the Fourth Gospel the choice is either/or. All situations are reduced to two clear-cut alternatives, and all the characters must eventually make their choice. So must the reader.’⁴ Given the dualism, it is surprising is that the assessments of Nicodemus vary so widely.

Some see Nicodemus moving in a positive direction from his initial confusion at Jesus’ words (3:1-10), to his tentative defence of Jesus (7:50-51), to his final act of claiming Jesus’ body for burial, which is understood to convey faith (19:38-42).⁵ Others read the evidence negatively, noting that he is initially depicted as an unbeliever (3:11-12), speaks only of what the law requires and makes no claims about Jesus (7:50-51), and finally demonstrates his lack of understanding by piling the spices used for the dead on a Jesus who is the resurrection and the life (19:38-42). If he has any faith he keeps it hidden, so that he remains among the Jewish authorities who are condemned for clinging to the honour they receive from other human beings instead of seeking the glory that comes from God (12:42).⁶

Still others stress the ambiguities in the portrayal of Nicodemus. They suggest that he hovers between the light of faith and the darkness of unbelief, attracted to Jesus and yet unable to commit himself. Given the assumption of a dualistic worldview, this ambiguity will also lead to a negative assessment: To be ‘anything less than fully committed to the Johannine Jesus’ is ‘to retain the damning and dangerous connections with darkness, the ‘Jews,’ and the world.’ Nicodemus ‘moves through the narrative with a foot in each world, and in this Gospel that is just not good enough.’⁷

³ Jouette M. Bassler, ‘Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel,’ *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 (1989), pp. 635-46.

⁴ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 104; Renz, ‘Nicodemus,’ p. 285.

⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, Anchor Bible 29-29A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966-70), vol. 2, pp. 959-60; Francis J. Moloney, *Glory not Dishonor: Reading John 13 – 21* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998) 149; J. N. Suggit, ‘Nicodemus – The True Jew,’ *Neotestamentica* 14 (1981), pp. 90-110.

⁶ Marinus de Jonge, *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven and Son of God. Jesus Christ and the Christians in Johannine Perspective* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977), pp. 29-47; Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 136; Dennis D. Sylva, ‘Nicodemus and his Spices,’ *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988), pp. 148-51; Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 77, 314-15.

⁷ Bassler, ‘Mixed Signals,’ p. 646; cf. Colleen M. Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization* (SBLDS 167; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), pp. 85-103; S. A. Hunt, ‘Nicodemus, Lazarus, and the Fear of “the Jews” in the Fourth Gospel,’ in G. Van Belle, M. Labahn, and P. Maritz

Literary studies have been supplemented by attempts to relate John's dualistic outlook and portrayal of Nicodemus to a reconstruction of the social context in which the gospel was composed. Some note that the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, which is set during Jesus' ministry early in the first century, seems to reflect the Christian community's conflict with the synagogue later in the first century. The Johannine Jesus speaks as if he has already ascended to heaven, so that his words reflect a post-Easter perspective (3:13). He seems to speak for the Johannine Christians when he says, 'We speak of what *we* know and bear witness to what *we* have seen' (3:11a; cf. 1:14). By addressing Nicodemus in the plural he censures the uncomprehending Jewish community when he says, '*you people* do not receive our testimony' (3:11b).

For some, this characterisation of Nicodemus is an appeal for outsiders to become insiders. To 'be born from above requires a decision to believe in the one sent from God' and 'adherence to the *community* of such believers,' publicly signified by baptism.⁸ For others, the implication is just the reverse: it reinforces the community's boundaries. The confusing conversation about new birth is construed as 'anti-language,' which is meaningful to insiders but opaque to outsiders. From this perspective the social function of the language is to maintain the distinctive identity of the Johannine Christians over against the Jewish community and competing Christian groups.⁹ Some add that ascribing a few positive traits to Nicodemus could have helped to maintain the basic dichotomy between insiders and outsiders by accounting for the fact that not all members of the Jewish community were antagonistic toward Jesus, and yet showing that such people were still outsiders to the Christian community.¹⁰

There are, however, important reasons to think that the gospel's approach to character portrayal is less dualistic. From a literary perspective, the characters who play positive roles in the story may exhibit significant shortcomings in both faith and understanding. For example, the Samaritan woman fails to comprehend what Jesus means by 'living water' (4:7-15). She makes an evasive remark about having no husband (4:17), and when Jesus tells her that he is the Messiah, she stops short of saying she believes it (4:25-26). She invites her townspeople to 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done,' while adding a question that technically expects a negative answer, 'He cannot be the Christ, can he?' (4:29). Her role is certainly positive in that she is the catalyst for bringing others to meet Jesus, even though her final comments stop short of a clear statement of belief.

The same mixed picture is true of the disciples. They readily identify Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, and the King of Israel (1:41, 49) and invite others to 'Come and see' Jesus (1:46). When Jesus turns water into wine they believe (2:11). Yet in Samaria they are as baffled about the nature of Jesus' 'food' as the woman is about his 'living water' (4:31-38). When they go to town they merely return with lunch, whereas the woman brings the town to meet Jesus. The insiders may be called 'disciples' but the woman who is an outsider actually does the work of a disciple by inviting others to 'Come and see' (4:29).

(eds.) *Repetitions and Variations in the Fourth Gospel: Style, Text, Interpretation* (BETL 223; Leuven: Peeters, 2009), pp. 199-212.

⁸ David Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1989), p. 58.

⁹ Richard L. Rohrbaugh, 'What's the Matter with Nicodemus? A Social-Science Perspective on John 3:1-21,' in Holly E. Neraon (ed.) *Distant Voices Drawing Near: Essays in Honor of Antoinette Clark Wire* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), pp. 145-58.

¹⁰ Raimo Hakola, 'The Burden of Ambiguity: Nicodemus and the Social Identity of the Johannine Christians,' *New Testament Studies* 55 (2009), pp. 438-55.

One might look for a more straightforward paradigm in the story of the man born blind, who is healed at the beginning of the episode and worships Jesus at the end (9:7, 38). His final statement of faith makes him a very positive figure. But it is interesting to ask where he can actually be called a believer. Is it at the beginning, when he silently goes to the pool as directed by Jesus (9:7)? Or when he acknowledges that ‘the man called Jesus’ put mud on his eyes and told him to wash (9:11)? In the middle of the story he calls Jesus ‘a prophet’ (9:17) and someone ‘from God’ (9:33), but he does not call Jesus the Messiah and in the final scene has to ask who the Son of Man is (9:36). So are readers to think he is a believer only at the end, when he says, ‘I believe’ (9:38), or has faith emerged along the way?

The gospel sometimes makes sharp contrasts between belief and unbelief, yet its characters often resist easy categorisation. If dualistic statements create clear categories like light and darkness, the gospel’s approach to character portrayal recognizes that life is more complex. Readers cannot use the dualistic categories to define a character’s response to Jesus without also asking how a character’s response to Jesus might redefine the categories.

These literary observations about the complexity in John’s approach to characterisation can be correlated with a more multidimensional reconstruction of the gospel’s social context. It seems likely that conflicts between the followers of Jesus and non-Christian Jews contributed to the present shape of the gospel, which gives prominent attention to Jewish objections for the claims made about Jesus. At the same time, it recognizes that Jesus’ followers were initially drawn from the Jewish community—like Nathanael the ‘Israelite’ (1:47)—and it shows that within the Jewish community responses to Jesus were mixed. Significantly, the gospel assumes that Scripture and Jewish tradition, rightly understood, bear witness to Jesus.¹¹

The gospel recognizes the tensions between the believing community and ‘the world’ outside it (15:18-25), and yet it emphasizes that the disciples who have been called out of the world are again sent into it (17:18; 20:21). Scenes in which Jesus is active in Samaria and the Greeks come to see him extend hope that some from ‘the world’ will become part of the Christian community (4:42; 12:19-20). The gospel distinguishes belief from unbelief and the community from the world, while recognizing that the situation is dynamic rather than static. The multidimensional portrayal of Nicodemus fits well within a situation where the community’s boundaries must remain permeable.¹²

Nicodemus as an Individual, Group Representative, and Member of the Human World (3:1-21)

The Fourth Gospel portrays Nicodemus as figure whose identity has several dimensions. In his initial encounter with Jesus these dimensions unfold in concentric circles: At first readers see an individual Pharisee, who comes to Jesus by night and is addressed in the second person singular (3:1-10). In the middle of the episode the horizon expands as the language shifts into the first and second person plural, so that readers have the impression that Jesus speaks for one group (‘we’) and addresses Nicodemus as the representative of another group (‘you’ plural, 3:11-12). Then in

¹¹ On the variety of perspectives on ‘the Jews’ see Lars Kierspel, *The Jews and the World in the Fourth Gospel: Parallelism, Function, and Context* (WUNT 2/220; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

¹² On this approach to the context see Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), pp. 18-24, 247-64.

the last part of the passage the language moves into the third person, so that readers can see how the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus discloses the character of God's relationship to the world (3:13-21). The pattern is not unique to this passage. In the next chapter the Samaritan woman is introduced as an individual (4:7-9), who later is the spokesperson for her community ('we' and 'you' plural, 4:20-21), and the Samaritans in turn announce Jesus' significance for 'the world' (4:42).¹³

As an individual, Nicodemus is 'a man' (ἄνθρωπος), a Pharisee, and 'an authority' (ἄρχων) among the Jews (3:1). When Nicodemus speaks of the impossibility of 'a man' being born 'when he is old,' he seems to characterise himself as someone well along in years (3:4), which would be fitting for someone called 'the teacher of Israel' (3:10). Although groups of Pharisees, Jews, and authorities are mentioned elsewhere in the gospel, Nicodemus is one of the rare Jewish leaders to be identified by name. The only other Jewish leaders who are named are the high priests Annas (18:13, 24) and Caiaphas (11:49; 18:13, 14, 24, 28). Whereas Jews and Pharisees commonly speak as a group, Nicodemus stands out as a figure with his own identity, and at times he will speak and act in ways that distinguish him from his peers.

In the initial encounter readers are told that 'this one' (οὗτος) came to Jesus by night. The singular suggests that Nicodemus is alone. No one else is said to be present and Jesus speaks to Nicodemus in the second person singular, 'Truly, truly I say to you (σοι)' (3:3, 5). The fact that Nicodemus comes at night (3:2) is sometimes thought to emphasise his role as an individual, who comes at night because he does not share the views of other Pharisees and does not want to be seen by them.¹⁴ In one sense this could be positive, since it would mean that Nicodemus is separating himself from the others by coming to Jesus, but in another sense it is negative, since those who keep their faith a secret are censured later in the gospel (12:42-43). The tensions are heightened because it is not clear whether Nicodemus is coming out of the darkness to Jesus, who is the light, or whether Nicodemus remains cloaked in darkness even as he comes. The implications need to be worked out as the story progresses.

The next dimension concerns Nicodemus's representative role, which is signalled by his initial words to Jesus, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God' (3:2). Jesus picks up this dimension in the middle of the conversation when he uses the plural to tell Nicodemus, '*you people* do not receive our testimony. If I told *you people* about earthly things and *you people* do not believe, how will *you people* believe if I tell *you people* about heavenly things?' (3:11-12). The implication is that Nicodemus's incredulity is typical of the group to which he belongs. What complicates interpretation is that the context identifies Nicodemus with two different groups.

First, he is a Pharisee and an authority among the Jews (3:1). Although Pharisees are technically a subgroup within the Jewish community, the gospel often treats Pharisees and Jews as one category. Earlier in the gospel the Pharisees and Jews of Jerusalem together sent delegates to ask John the Baptist about his identity and reason for baptizing (1:19, 24). Accordingly, readers might assume that Nicodemus represents these groups when he goes to Jesus. Moreover, when Jesus drove the merchants and moneychangers out of the temple, 'the Jews' demanded to know, 'What sign can you show us for doing these things?' (2:18). Jesus told them, 'Destroy this temple

¹³ See also the way Jesus addresses Nathanael (1:50-51) and the royal official (4:48) in the plural to suggest that what is true of them as individuals is also true of others.

¹⁴ Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson and London: Continuum, 2005), p. 149.

and in three days I will raise it,' but they failed to comprehend that he referred to the temple of his body (2:19-22). Nicodemus seems to share the outlook of this group since he too has an interest in signs and yet fails to comprehend what Jesus means by new birth (3:2, 4).

Yet Nicodemus also has connections with a second group in Jerusalem, which consists of people of unreliable faith. After the cleansing of the temple, the gospel says that during the Passover festival and 'many' (πολλοί) believed in his name when they saw the signs that he did (2:23). Their positive response seems to differentiate them from the more sceptical Jews in the temple and to align them with the disciples, who believed when they saw the sign Jesus performed at Cana (2:11). Nicodemus seems to speak for this group when he says, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you are doing unless God is with him' (3:2). The problem is that the gospel is clearly critical of those whose faith relies on signs. The writer makes a play on the word 'believe' (πιστεύω) by saying that they 'believed' in Jesus' name because of the signs, but Jesus did not 'believe' in them (2:24). Their faith—however sincere—was untrustworthy.

The complex characterisation of Nicodemus has a levelling effect. He has traits of two groups that on one level seem different: the Jews and Pharisees are presumably more negative toward Jesus, while those who believe because of the signs are more positive. But on another level both groups are alike in that neither seems able to understand Jesus' identity and mission. Accordingly, the nocturnal setting of Nicodemus's conversation with Jesus seems appropriate. Both sceptics and misguided believers are 'in the dark' when it comes to discerning the nature of God's kingdom and the work of the Spirit that brings new life.

The horizon continues to expand as the gospel shows how the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus not only characterises the encounter between different groups, but depicts God's relationship to humanity. When speaking about the unreliable believers in Jerusalem the gospel says, 'Jesus did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and had no need for anyone to testify concerning man (τοῦ ἀνθρώπου), for he himself knew what was in man (τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ). Now there was a man (ἄνθρωπος),' a Pharisee named Nicodemus (2:24-3:1). What is true for him as an individual and for the groups he represents also typifies the condition of humankind generally.¹⁵

Jesus' opening comments to Nicodemus deal with a *human* problem: the need to be born or begotten anew (3:3, 7). By using images of procreation, Jesus speaks in terms applicable to people of all sorts. The barrier to the kingdom of which Jesus speaks is not limited to the perspective of the Pharisees or those preoccupied with the signs. The problem concerns the limitations of 'the flesh' (σάρξ) that all human beings share (3:8). In John's gospel the flesh is not inherently evil—after all, the Word of God becomes 'flesh' (1:14; cf. 6:51-56). Rather, flesh is limited and mortal; it cannot generate the eternal life that God provides (3:15, 16). The incapacity to generate eternal life characterises the human condition.

In the final part of the episode Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus becomes a microcosm of God's encounter with 'the world' (ὁ κόσμος). In John's gospel 'the world' was created by God (1:10) and has become alienated from God, as shown by its negative reactions to Jesus and his followers (7:7; 15:18-19). The images of darkness in 3:19-20 reflect the world's alienation from its Creator, and yet this same passage also refers to the love God has for the world, moving him to

¹⁵ Francis J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading John 1 – 4* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 106; J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 175-76

send the Son into the world to give it life (3:13-17). The Jewish leader who came ‘by night’ is emblematic of the world of darkness into which the light of divine love and truth has come in Jesus (3:2, 19). If Nicodemus was an individual ‘man’ (3:1) and Jesus knew what was in ‘man’ (2:25), the final section deals with how the light affects ‘men’ (οἱ ἄνθρωποι), that is, the human beings who comprise the world that God loves.

All three dimensions of Nicodemus’s identity need to be taken together. He is an individual but not only an individual. He can also represent a group while exhibiting traits that go beyond that group. Finally, he can exhibit traits of humankind and ‘the world’ as a whole, and yet he does not cease being an individual, so during the narrative readers will find him speaking and acting in ways that differentiate him from others.¹⁶ By portraying Nicodemus with these concentric circles of identity the writer invites readers to see that what is true for him may be true for others, and true for the readers themselves.

Jesus Discloses the Character of Nicodemus (3:1-21)

Nicodemus’s initial encounter with Jesus is challenging to interpret because it brings post-resurrection perspectives into a pre-passion conversation. Whether speaking of the work of the Spirit, which would be infused into the Christian community after Jesus’ resurrection (3:5-8; cf. 7:37-39; 16:7; 20:22) or the way Jesus would be ‘lifted up’ through crucifixion (3:14-15; 12:32-33), the episode points to forms of divine action that would be meaningful to readers of later times but unintelligible in a conversation before that time—like the one involving Nicodemus. What the portrayal of Nicodemus will show is that the Son of Man ‘must’ (δεῖ) be lifted up (3:14), because apart from God’s action people cannot ‘see’ the kingdom of God (3:3) or believe and have life (3:15).

The conversation begins with Nicodemus’s claim to have knowledge of God. He says, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can (οὐδεὶς δύναται) do these signs that you do unless (ἐὰν μὴ) God is with him’ (3:2). Jesus’ response inverts Nicodemus’s comment and redefines the issue. Where Nicodemus focuses on what Jesus *can do* in relation to God, Jesus focuses on what people *cannot do* apart from God. Where Nicodemus has seen signs, Jesus speaks of seeing God’s kingdom, which is of another order. Jesus says, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, unless (ἐὰν μὴ) someone is born anew he cannot (οὐ δύναται) see the kingdom of God’ (3:3). The conversation exposes Nicodemus’s limitations on two levels: First, it shows that his claim to ‘know’ is incorrect, since he proves to be incapable of understanding what Jesus is saying. Second, it points to a deeper inability to see or enter the kingdom, which is something Nicodemus shares with all human beings.

Jesus’ statement identifies seeing God’s kingdom as the goal, a person’s incapacity as the problem, and new birth as the means for overcoming the problem. Introducing the kingdom as the goal is surprising since Nicodemus said nothing about it in his opening remark, and it was at most a subtheme in the previous chapters. The delegation from the Pharisees apparently wanted to know whether John the Baptist was the Messiah, a royal figure (1:20, 25), and the first disciples called Jesus the Messiah and King of Israel (1:41, 49), whose act of turning water into wine had messianic overtones.¹⁷

¹⁶ Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 33-47; Conway, *Men and Women*, p. 47.

¹⁷ Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, vol. 1, p. 105; Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 82-86.

The principal function of the kingdom theme is to foreshadow the passion narrative. Such foreshadowing fits the pattern of previous chapters where John the Baptist introduced Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb of God (1:29), Jesus responded to his mother's concern about wine with a cryptic reference to the coming 'hour' of his passion (2:4), and he told the Jews in Jerusalem about the destruction and raising up of the 'temple' of his body (2:19). The kingdom (βασιλεία) that is briefly mentioned in the dialogue with Nicodemus later reappears when Jesus tells Pilate that his kingdom is not from this world (18:36), in a context where Jesus' identity as the King (βασιλεύς) of the Jews is the focus of debate (18:33, 37, 39; 19:3, 12, 14, 15). That title is inscribed above his cross in three languages (19:19-22). In John's gospel, people cannot truly 'see' God's kingdom until the passion narrative discloses the character of Jesus' kingship (6:15; 12:13-16, 34-36).

Nicodemus passes over the significance of the kingdom without comment, focusing instead on the question of access to it. He is drawn to the cryptic expression Jesus used: γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν. This expression has multiple layers of ambiguity. First, the word γεννηθῆ can be used for either parent. It can mean being 'born' from the mother or 'begotten' by the father. Second, the word ἄνωθεν can either have the temporal sense of 'again' or the spatial sense of 'from above.' Third, when used an ordinary way, begetting and giving birth lead to life in a physical sense, yet the language can also be used in a transferred sense for something spiritual.

Jesus' ambiguous words prove revelatory for they draw out a response from Nicodemus and disclose the limits of his understanding. Nicodemus takes γεννηθῆ as birth from the mother, ἄνωθεν as 'again' or 'a second time,' and construes the whole expression in a physical sense, which leads to the ridiculous picture of a grown man trying to crawl back into his mother's womb in order to start the birth process all over again (3:4). As Nicodemus spells out the incongruity, he knows that his interpretation is absurd. He says that a man 'cannot enter into his mother's womb a second time and be born, is he?' The expected answer is 'No, of course not.'

Nicodemus can see that his interpretation does not work, but he cannot discern an alternative. He is not able to 'see' what Jesus is talking about. Jesus responds by emphasizing the role of divine action in the process. He tells Nicodemus that unless one is 'born'—or perhaps 'begotten'—of water and the Spirit, he is not able to enter the kingdom of God (3:6). Human incapacity (οὐ δύναται) remains the problem, and if that barrier is to be overcome it will be through divine agency. Nicodemus heard ἄνωθεν only as 'a second time,' but the term can also mean 'from above,' which is the primary sense elsewhere in John's gospel (3:31; 19:11; cf. 19:23).¹⁸ And one way God acts 'from above' is by sending the Spirit.

Jesus continues to confound Nicodemus by using the term πνεῦμα in three different ways in rapid succession. He says that what is born or begotten through God's 'Spirit' is 'spirit,' and this divine activity is as incomprehensible as the blowing of the spirit or 'wind' (3:6-8). When read in the context of the whole gospel, the comments indicate that the Spirit is the means through which God engenders the new 'spirit' of faith within a person, but the interplay between the different dimensions of meaning leaves Nicodemus with the question: 'How can these things be?' (3:9). It is a revelatory moment and Jesus says to Nicodemus, 'Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not know these things?' (3:10). The question brings out the irony. The Jewish leader who began by telling Jesus, 'we know that you are a teacher who has come from God,' proves that he really *does not know* what Jesus is saying (3:2, 9).

¹⁸ Both dimensions of ἄνωθεν may be operative here, but Nicodemus discerns only one of them. See Moloney, *Belief in the Word*, pp. 109-10; Gail R. O'Day, *The Gospel of John*, New Interpreter's Bible vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), pp. 549-50.

The conversation characterises Nicodemus as someone with a dilemma. He began by claiming to ‘know’ Jesus, but has now been exposed as one who does not understand. This is not primarily a problem of lack of information; it has to do with a more fundamental inability to comprehend the ways of God. Jesus says, ‘If I have told you people earthly things and you do not believe, how will you people believe if I tell you heavenly things?’ (3:12). Heavenly discourse will not overcome the problem. The issue is not that Nicodemus has made the wrong choice instead of the right choice. Rather, he has been shown that apart from the activity of God he really has no choice to make. Flesh cannot generate life and God’s Spirit blows in ways he cannot comprehend or control.

Nicodemus’s dilemma gives divine action a central place in characterisation. Given what has been said thus far, Nicodemus has shown that he ‘cannot’ (οὐ δύναται) see or enter God’s kingdom; he lacks the capacity to engender the new birth into life. The question is whether God will act and if God does how readers might discern it through the portrayal of Nicodemus. The passage points to actions of God that for the readers are past but in the flow of the narrative are yet to come. If Jesus ‘must’ (δεῖ) be lifted up in crucifixion for people to believe and have life (3:14-15), then readers must wait to see what effect the crucifixion might have on someone like Nicodemus.

Nicodemus’s nocturnal encounter with Jesus concludes with comments about what it means for light to enter a benighted world. It provides a framework for interpreting the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus that has just occurred, as well as subsequent appearances of Nicodemus in the narrative. On the one hand, the one who does evil will love darkness and ‘not come’ to the light in order that he might not be ‘exposed’ (ἐλεγεθῆ, 3:19-20). On the other hand, ‘the one who does what is true comes to the light, in order that it might be revealed that his deeds have been done in God’ (ἐν θεῷ, 3:21). Coming to the light discloses divine action, just as Jesus later brings light to the eyes of a blind man in order that ‘the works of God might be revealed in him’ (9:4).¹⁹ God’s activity is revealed through its effects in human beings. Thus far Nicodemus has ‘come’ to Jesus (3:2), which someone who hated the light would not do; and during the conversation his incomprehension was relentlessly ‘exposed.’ At the same time it cannot be said that he is fully enlightened or gives evidence of doing ‘what is true.’ Whether he will do so is a question that must be carried forward in the narrative.

Nicodemus Reveals the Character of the Other Pharisees (7:50-51)

Nicodemus’s second appearance occurs during the festival of Booths as people engage in sharp debates over Jesus’ identity. Throughout this episode people speak as groups rather than as individuals (7:1-8:59). The Jews, Pharisees, and crowd have various opinions about Jesus, with some more positive and others more negative. The only people who are named and speak as individuals are Jesus and Nicodemus. Jesus repeatedly exposes his opponents’ hostility and pretensions to know the ways of God, and he warns them not to judge by appearances but with right judgment (7:24). Nicodemus has a similar role, for he asks a question that reveals how the Jewish authorities’ claim to know the law actually masks their ignorance of what it requires.

The ‘crowd’ (ὁ ὄχλος) has mixed opinions about Jesus. Some think he is a good man (7:12). They interpret Jesus’ signs positively and are said to believe in him (7:31). When Jesus speaks of

¹⁹ On ἐν θεῷ as an indication of God’s activity see Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, pp. 209-10.

the gift of living water, some conclude that he might be ‘the prophet’ like Moses or even the Messiah (7:40-41). Their views seem commendable, though prior to Nicodemus’s last appearance readers were told that Jesus did not trust those whose faith depended on signs (2:23-25). The others in the crowd have a negative perception. They charge that Jesus is deceiving people (7:12) and that he has a demon because he imagines that people want to kill him (7:20). They dismiss the idea that Jesus might be the Messiah because he does not fit their expectations (7:27, 41-42).

The Jewish leaders share the idea that Jesus is deceiving people (7:47). The animosity of those called ‘the Jews’ (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι) has grown because Jesus healed on the Sabbath and called God his own Father, which they construed as a wrongful attempt to make himself equal to God (5:16-18). Their desire to kill Jesus makes others afraid to speak openly (7:1, 11, 13). Later, ‘the Jews’ wonder at how Jesus can have such learning, not recognizing that his teaching is from God (7:15), and they puzzle over what he means by ‘going away,’ unable to see that he is going to God (7:35). ‘The Jews’ work together with the Pharisees and high priests, who want Jesus arrested (7:32, 45).

Before Nicodemus is reintroduced, a crack appears in what has seemed to be monolithic opposition to Jesus among the authorities. The Pharisees and chief priests send some officers (οἱ ὑπερέται) to arrest Jesus (7:31-32). But after Jesus extends the promise of living water, evoking a mixed response from the crowd, the officers return without arresting him and say, ‘Never has anyone spoken like this man!’ (7:45-46). Their response indicates that listening to Jesus can have surprising effects. Where the Pharisees had called for Jesus’ arrest, the words of Jesus moved the officers to disobey the Pharisees and refrain from the arrest. In response the Pharisees wonder of the officers have been deceived, and they argue that those who respond positively to Jesus show ignorance of the law (7:47-49).

At this point Nicodemus is reintroduced as the one who ‘had gone to [Jesus] before’ (7:50a). Although Nicodemus is said to be ‘one of them’ (7:50b), his words run counter to the views of the other Pharisees. He asks, ‘Our law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and coming to know what he is doing, does it?’ The question expects a negative answer: ‘No, our law does not work that way.’ In a basic sense the question calls for following due process, so that people learn the facts of a case before they render judgment. Yet the idea that people should ‘hear’ Jesus also suggests listening and heeding what he says (10:3, 16, 27), and coming to ‘know’ what he is doing points to the need for understanding (6:69; 10:38; 13:7).²⁰ The way the officers changed course—at least for the moment—when they heard Jesus suggests that listening could bring positive results.

Interpreters have asked whether Nicodemus can be called a believer at this point, since certain comments in the text point this direction. When the crowd says, ‘None of the authorities (οἱ ἄρχοντες) know that this is really the Messiah, do they?’ (7:26), their question expects a negative answer. They assume that none of the authorities believe, and yet they have also been told not to judge by appearances but to judge with right judgment, which suggests that they could well be wrong (7:24). Later, the Pharisees tell the officials, ‘None of the authorities or the Pharisees has believed in him, have they?’ (7:47-48), and they too expect a negative answer. But since readers are to see that their judgments about the law and Jesus are incorrect, it seems likely that here again they are incorrect, and that Nicodemus is an ‘authority’ (3:1) who does believe. The other Pharisees apparently think he is moving in this direction and say, ‘You are not from Galilee too, are you?’

²⁰ Severino Pancaro, ‘The Metamorphosis of a Legal Principle in the Fourth Gospel. A Closer Look at Jn 7,51,’ *Biblica* 53 (1972), pp. 340-61.

(7:52). From their perspective, Nicodemus is aligning himself all too closely with Jesus the Galilean (7:41).

Despite these positive signals, some interpreters point out that Nicodemus speaks of the law rather than making an open statement of faith. If the basic categories are a public verbal profession of belief and anything else, then Nicodemus falls short. Moreover, his words might point to the need to ‘hear’ and ‘know’ Jesus, but that does not mean he understood the deep theological implications of those words.²¹ So given the complexity, it is worth asking whether the usual categories are adequate for interpretation.

The previous episode concluded with a contrast between those who do evil and those who do what is true (3:19-21). Here Nicodemus exposes the truth about the other Pharisees on two levels: First, they claim that those who listen to Jesus are ignorant of the law, yet by disregarding due process in their condemnation of Jesus, they show their own ignorance of the law. Second, Nicodemus shows that the Pharisees, who have not first (πρῶτον) give Jesus a hearing, cannot claim to ‘know’ (γινῶ) what he is doing (7:51). When Nicodemus went to Jesus before (πρότερον, 7:50), Jesus showed him how little he could claim to ‘know’ (γινώσκεις, 3:10). In this episode Nicodemus is the one who exposes the lack of knowledge among his peers.²² In the categories of his previous visit, Nicodemus ‘does what is true’ (3:21a). And if that is the case, then readers need to ask whether in him they can discern the work of God (3:21b).

The Crucifixion Discloses the Character of Divine Action (19:38-42)

Nicodemus’s final appearance comes after the crucifixion, which fits the arc of the narrative. Jesus’ first words to Nicodemus concerned the need to ‘see the kingdom of God’ (3:3), which is developed in John’s account of Jesus’ trial. In the first encounter Jesus also said that it was necessary for the Son of Man to be ‘lifted up,’ alluding to the crucifixion, which for Nicodemus was still in the future (3:14-15). These elements provide perspectives on Nicodemus’s role in the aftermath of the crucifixion.

At Jesus’ trial Pilate asks whether he is the King of the Jews, and Jesus replies that his kingdom (βασιλεία) is not from this world (18:33, 36). When Pilate offers to release the King of the Jews, the Jewish leaders reject the idea (18:39-40) and Roman soldiers use the title King of the Jews to ridicule Jesus (19:3). The Jewish leaders argue that Jesus’ claim to kingship sets him against the emperor, warranting death (19:12-15). The theme culminates in the sign above the cross, which reads ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews’ (19:19). Since the sign could suggest that Jesus really is the King of the Jews the chief priests want the sign changed (19:21). Yet Pilate refuses, and the sign identifying Jesus the King of the Jews remains (19:22). At each stage the opposition is defined by a rejection of the idea that Jesus is King of the Jews.

In John’s account of Jesus’ burial, ‘the Jews’ as a group want the legs of those crucified to be broken and the bodies taken away. Their concern is proper observance of Jewish law. They do not want the bodies to remain on the cross on the Sabbath, which would begin at sundown (19:31). The request is fitting from a group that has condemned Jesus for violating the Sabbath (5:9-18; 7:23; 9:16) and charged that he deserved death under Jewish law (19:7). Asking that the bodies be removed appeared to show careful attention to the statute which said that if a person was

²¹ Renz, ‘Nicodemus,’ pp. 269-70.

²² Francis J. Moloney, *Signs and Shadows: Reading John 5 – 12* (Minneapolis; Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 91-92.

condemned to death and hung on a tree, the body was not to remain on the tree overnight but was to be buried that same day (Deut 21:22-23).

The gospel casts Nicodemus in a subversive role that extends the trajectory set by his previous appearance. In both scenes the majority of the Jewish leaders assume that adhering to Jewish law means condemning Jesus, and in both scenes Nicodemus subverts their perspective by invoking Jewish law or practice in favour of Jesus. Together with Joseph of Arimathea, he gives Jesus a decent burial, which in Jewish tradition is an act of respect that is pleasing to God, whether performed publicly or in secret.²³ They wrap the body in linen cloths with spices, ‘according to the burial custom of the Jews’ (John 19:40), and complete the burial on ‘the day of preparation of the Jews’ (19:42). If the crucified Jesus is the rightful King *of the Jews*, as the gospel says he is, then it is fitting that Nicodemus and Joseph show how the practices *of the Jews* rightly give honour to Jesus.

The royal motifs in the passage fit this pattern of subversive characterisation. For ‘the Jews’ in the passion narrative, adherence to Jewish tradition meant rejecting the kingly role of Jesus. Nicodemus, however, gives Jesus a Jewish burial that is fit for a king. He entombs Jesus with one hundred pounds of spices, a quantity so large that it goes beyond anything used in ordinary burials, but it would be suitable for the King of the Jews (19:39).²⁴ What the others have denied, Nicodemus affirms through his actions. He ‘does what is true’ (3:21).

Interpreters sometimes argue that the spices are at best an unwitting testimony to Jesus’ kingship, and that the burial underscores the limits of Nicodemus’ understanding. Why smother the one who is the resurrection and the life with a hundred pounds of spices intended for the dead?²⁵ An obvious response is that the gospel does not picture any of Jesus’ disciples comprehending the resurrection at this point, so Nicodemus can hardly be faulted on that account. Moreover, the question of the kingdom, which was introduced in 3:3, reaches its narrative climax in the scenes of trial and crucifixion. To ‘see the kingdom’ in this gospel, one must come to terms with its crucified king, and Nicodemus points readers in this direction.²⁶

Nicodemus can be characterised one who ‘does what is true’ in the way that Mary did earlier. Before the passion she used a single pound of myrrh to anoint Jesus feet in an act of devotion that foreshadowed his burial, and Jesus’ deemed that appropriate, even though she did not comprehend the full import of the action (12:1-8). Now that the crucifixion is complete, Nicodemus uses one hundred times as much spice to conduct the burial itself. As the gospel portrays the scene Nicodemus does not speak, but neither did Mary. They speak through their actions.

The remaining details in the scene raise questions about how categories work in the gospel’s pattern of characterisation. The gospel reminds readers that Nicodemus had ‘at first came to [Jesus] by night’ (19:39) and that Joseph of Arimathea was a disciple who had been keeping his faith a secret out of fear of the Jews (19:38). Accordingly, some see both now stepping into the

²³ Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.211; Tob 1:16-20; 2:3-8; 4:3-4; 6:15; 8:12; 14:10-13; János Bolyki, ‘Burial as an Ethical Task in the Book of Tobit, in the Bible and in the Greek Tragedies,’ in Géza G. Zeravits and József Zsengellér (eds.) *The Book of Tobit: Text, Tradition, Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 89-101.

²⁴ Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, Vol. 2, pp. 959-60; Hartwig Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, Handbuch zum Neuen Testament 6 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), pp. 754-55.

²⁵ De Jonge, *Jesus*, p. 34; Sylva, ‘Nicodemus and his Spices.’

²⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), vol. 2, p. 1267.

light by publicly claiming the body of Jesus.²⁷ Others see both lingering in the shadows, refusing to make an open commitment, so that they fall under the negative judgment made earlier, when it was said that many of the Jewish authorities believed in Jesus, but ‘because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God’ (12:42-43).²⁸

Here again it is helpful to ask how well the categories work. Nicodemus first came to Jesus by night (3:2), whereas the burial takes place on ‘the day of preparation’ for the Sabbath (19:31, 42). Since the Sabbath would begin in the evening, readers are to picture Nicodemus acting while it is still day rather than after ‘night comes when no one can work’ (9:4; cf. 12:35-36). Given the prominence of the light and darkness imagery earlier, one would expect it to play a major role here, and in an understated way it does support a positive interpretation of the characters at the burial. Moreover, if ‘fear of the Jews’ characterised Joseph and perhaps Nicodemus, it also characterises the disciples after the crucifixion (20:19). Finally, the actions of Nicodemus and Joseph do not fit the categories used for the secret believers in 12:42-43. The way they give Jesus a lavish burial is designed to give Jesus the glory, not to protect their own. They do ‘what is true’ (3:21).

The characterisation of Nicodemus provides glimpses into the way God interacts with human beings and the central role the crucifixion plays in the process. The crucifixion was foreshadowed in Jesus’ initial encounter with Nicodemus, when he said, ‘And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him might have eternal life’ (3:14-15). The word ‘lift up’ (ὑψόω) shows that in being physically elevated on the cross Jesus is also exalted in glory (3:14), and this is the transition point between the disclosure of unbelief (3:13) and the prospect of faith (3:15).

The theme returns at the close of Jesus’ public ministry when throngs of people come to him because of the signs, and yet prove incapable of understanding who Jesus is (12:18, 34). That same scene also indicts the authorities, who would not profess faith because they wanted to protect the glory they received from other people (12:42-43). Yet in the face of such pervasive unbelief Jesus also says that ‘I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself’ (12:32). Given only the signs, people ‘did not’ and ‘could not believe’ (12:37, 39). Yet through his elevation on the cross, Jesus promises to ‘draw’ people to himself. Through the portrayal of Nicodemus and Joseph at the burial, the gospel shows people being ‘drawn’ to the crucified Christ. They give readers a way of seeing what Jesus’ death would accomplish.²⁹

Conclusion

Theological complexity is integral to characterisation of Nicodemus. As an individual, an authority among the Jews, and a representative of ‘the world’ he demonstrates the human incapacity to ‘see’ the kingdom of which Jesus speaks (3:3). His limitations demonstrate the need for divine action and show why ‘the Son of Man must be lifted up’ in order that people might believe and have life (3:14-15). The portrayal of Nicodemus does not offer a simple example of someone determining

²⁷ Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, vol. 2, p. 959; O’Day, *The Gospel of John*, pp. 835-36.

²⁸ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 136; Bassler, ‘Mixed Signals,’ p. 646; Neyrey, *The Gospel of John*, pp. 314-15.

²⁹ Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, vol. 2, p. 1268; O’Day, *The Gospel of John*, pp. 835-36.

to cross the line from unbelief into true faith. Rather, he gives readers glimpses of how the work of God is done. Initially, Jesus is the one who reveals the truth by exposing Nicodemus's pretensions to knowledge (3:1-13), but Nicodemus later assumes that role when he exposes the pretensions of the other Jewish leaders (7:50-51). As he 'does what is true' he reveals the activity of God (3:21). His actions after the crucifixion bear witness to the truth of Jesus' kingship, which the other Jewish leaders have denied (19:38-42), He 'does what is true' and helps readers to 'see' the cruciform nature of God's kingdom (3:3, 21). The portrayal of Nicodemus discloses how the crucified King of the Jews 'draws' people to himself (12:32), anticipating the way the readers could be drawn to faith through the agency of the Spirit (3:5-8).