

**THE DIVINE SPHERE  
ACCORDING TO JOHN 3:1-10**

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I declare that "THE DIVINE SPHERE ACCORDING TO JOHN 3:1-10" is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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## **Summary**

According to the research, emphatic “οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐλήλυθας” tells about confidence of Nicodemus in possession of trustworthy criteria, which allow him to judge what might be from God and, hence, what might not be from God. Epistemological premise of Nicodemus is the starting point for the whole conversation in Jn 3:1-21. Analysis of the Jewish literary tradition that used dualistic couples of antonyms to denote “otherness” of the divine sphere has shown that ontological difference (v. 6) makes it impossible for human (“flesh”) to know the divine sphere (“spirit”). This results in the fact that manifestations of the divine sphere (effect) are falsely taken by human for the divine sphere itself (cause). In other words, just verification of the divine sphere manifestation without initiative act on behalf of God does not allow human neither to correctly value this sphere, nor to enter it.

## **Key terms**

Christology

Divine sphere

Dualistic pairs

Epistemology

Gospel of John

Knowledge

Kataphatical theology

Otherness

Spiritual

Soteriology

## Contents

Introduction .....	1
Frames of the passage.....	2
Chapter I. Problematic of the traditional interpretation .....	6
1.1. Historiography.....	6
1.2. Weak points of the traditional approach .....	10
1.3. Proposal of this research .....	12
Chapter II. Theological framework.....	13
2.1. Christology in John .....	13
2.1.1. Son of Man.....	14
2.1.2. Son of God and Only Begotten Son.....	14
2.1.3. Light.....	15
2.2. Soteriology in John .....	16
2.2.1. Concept of belief.....	16
2.2.2. John and issue of sacraments .....	18
2.2.3. "Life" in John.....	18
2.2.4. Pneumatology.....	19
2.2.5. Eschatology in John's theology .....	20
2.3. Summary .....	20
Chapter III. Analysis of the chosen passage Jn 3:1-10.....	22
3.1. Verses one and two: Nicodemus' premise .....	22
3.2. Verses three and four: Jesus' response .....	26
3.3. Verses five through eight: Dialectic of sacred .....	30
3.3.1. Verse five .....	30
3.3.2. Verse six: otherness .....	34
3.3.3. Verse seven: the third statement of Jesus' thesis .....	44
3.3.4. Verse eight: Jesus' illustration .....	46
3.4. Verses nine and ten: Jesus' irony, the end of the dialogue part .....	49
3.5. Summary .....	51
Conclusion.....	54
Appendix I. Categories of antonym pairs.....	56
Appendix II. Three stages of the development of the dialogue part .....	61
Bibliography.....	62

## Introduction

The thesis of this paper is expressed as follows: The discourse between Nicodemus and Jesus in terms of coherency and inner logic is better understood with respect to the epistemological plane rather than through the traditional Christological or Soteriological planes. The first phrase of Nicodemus is a compliment that has a hidden nuance. The nuance reveals the epistemological premise that determines the coherency in the flow of the whole conversation. Thus, the focus of Jn 3:1-10 is on the question of otherness of the divine sphere and impossibility of humankind to understand it by its own strength without divine initiative. However, this passage does serve as a platform for Soteriological and Christological development of the conversation in Jn 3:11-21.

The Gospel of John has a unique place in Christian Church tradition. It was proven not only by the decision of the early Church to put it into canon, but also by the later practice in regular Christian life and struggles against heresies.<sup>1</sup> Content of the Fourth Gospel was debated in the early Church and remains to be a controversial issue. However, it has always attracted Christians in all periods throughout the history of Christianity.

This allure could be explained in different terms. First of all, theological teaching of the Gospel contributed a lot to the doctrinal development of the Christian Church. Such concepts as the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, the Trinity and the Holy Spirit all owe to the author of the Fourth Gospel. At the same time Jn attracted with his original approach to the life and service of Jesus of Nazareth. Attempts to see in Jn just a reflection of history, with its coherence and logical connectedness, led to the necessity to admit that Jn is not a chronological (or geographically oriented) narration of the life and teaching of Jesus. The goal of the Gospel, according to author's own confession (Jn 20:31), is *kerugmatik* and thus its structure is subordinate primarily to didactic purposes, which does not turn Jn into a less historical book. Major themes of John's theology and peculiarities of his approach, which will be discussed in first chapter, would not have been so popular and influential in the early Church if no history lied in their foundation.

The language and structure in the Gospel of John, which is different from what is now called Synoptic Gospels, all that also determined contemporary focus on the Gospel. These aspects have given cause for seeking possible relation between John's writing and Hellenistic literature. Hellenistic "syncretism" was "long considered to be the setting where Johannine theology took its rise" (Schnackenburg, 1980:120). This approach to the Johannine study was very influential in first half of the XX century.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Metzger quotes Coptic manual, published by Crum, where candidates for the deacon ministry ought to know the Gospel of John very well and to cite it by memory (Metzger, 1999:87).

The method for such an approach is to read the passage and think of a trend in the surrounding world of religious thought which could have stimulated John's theme (comparing mostly words and constructions that look alike). The research has shown that expressions (i.e. external part of theology) can convey absolutely different ideas (i.e. internal content of thought). However, according to the sound observation of Dodd, in Jn "the treatment of Hellenistic ideas is indeed strikingly different" (Dodd, 1963:73). In spite of any hypothetical connection of Jn to religious-philosophical literature, Dodd is correct in stating, "whatever influences may have been present have been masterfully controlled by a powerful and independent mind" (Dodd, 1963:6). In spite of all the questions concerning the origin of the Gospel of John, which have been asked by critics, one thing might be stated with clearance "Judaism and Hellenism were more strongly interwoven than had been thought" (Schnackenburg, 1980:119).

John 3:1-10 might be considered as a concise outline of John's theology that reflects all the difficulties related with the nature of the Fourth Gospel. John's theology is focused mainly on two issues: Christology and Soteriology. However, an attempt to interpret this segment in either of those planes raises incoherencies. First, there seems to be a logical break between verses two and three. The words of Jesus sound somewhat different from the tone of the phrase by Nicodemus. In a review of some of the commentaries and works devoted to John's Gospel we will see how scholars handle this break. The second question is the problem of terms in segment Jn 3:1-10 and their connectedness in this passage. Usually, as it will be shown later, interpreters try to handle them in the same Soteriological dimension. At that, sometimes it is difficult to say whether they are writing about the usage of particular words, or about the theology of ideas. Finally, the third and most interesting problem is how to interpret the passage Jn 3:1-10. The matter is that it is difficult to find something concrete and applicable when just looking at the lexical sense of the words. Jesus, though stating His ideas in known terms and even making commands, gives in Jn 3:1-10 no clue to what His "birth" means, nor explains what He means by "birth again/from above." After carefully studying several commentaries, I noticed that deductions were made with lots of doctrinal presuppositions when already formed doctrine determines understanding of the passage in habitual manner. In the first chapter I will address opinions of scholars and commentators from both Eastern and Western branches of the Christian Church who represent state of the case nowadays.

### **Frames of the passage**

In traditional Bible marking the beginning of the dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus is signified by the first verse of the third chapter. However, some scholars soundly assert that the abovementioned dialogue starts earlier, in Jn 2:23. It is here, according to their opinion, the author of the Forth Gospel starts the theme, which is illustrated by the conversation of Nicodemus and

Jesus. Arguments of such an approach are as follows. First, it is here that the author uses words and phrases, which begin the third chapter (cf. 2:25 “τὰ σημεῖα,” τί ἦν ἐν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ,” and 3:1 “Ἦν δὲ ἄνθρωπος,” “τὰ σημεῖα”). Second, the particle “δὲ” could be considered as copulative conjunction, tying the theme of 2:23-25 with its development in 3:1-10. This could be seen if we take into account that Nicodemus, in his introductory phrase mentions several miracles/signs, which were made by Jesus (“τὰ σημεῖα ποιεῖν ἃ σὺ ποιεῖς” 3:2). John does not list the miracles previous to the third chapter. In fact, before the third chapter, just one miracle is mentioned, the one occurred in Cana of Galilee. All others are not mentioned and are alluded to by avaricious “...θεωροῦντες αὐτοῦ τὰ σημεῖα ἃ ἐποίησεν” (Jn 2:23). Thus the plot line, including the dialogue, can start in 2:23. Besides, as Cottrell notes, Nicodemus came πρὸς αὐτόν, which also refers to “the antecedent to the pronoun that appears in 2:24” (Cottrell, 1989:279).

There is a connection of 2:23-25 with 3:1-10. At the same time it should be stipulated that three verses of the second chapter could be perfectly considered as a separate paragraph from the third chapter segment. Connectedness on a formal lexical level does allow us to read 3:1-10 as a new story. For example, in this passage the author comes to the conclusion which could possibly determine the topic of the following conversation: “He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man” (Jn 2:25). However, this phrase does not influence the dialogue in any way. Nicodemus did not come to intercede for somebody, i.e. to witness ones virtues. Nor do we see the development of temptation by Nicodemus in the conversation. Jesus very quickly takes the course of the dialogue into His own hands. Nicodemus does not object: he just expresses his own understanding of Jesus’ words and concepts by asking questions which are very tersely answered by Jesus, who allows himself some kind of irony at Nicodemus in the end of the dialogue part. In addition to that, the role of particle “δὲ” could be interpreted not only as conjunctive, but also as disjunctive one. For example, in case of 2:23-25 we see how the same “δὲ” is being used with partitive function: to distinguish narrative about temple scene from editorial insertion.

On the whole it is obvious that in any possible relation of Jn 2:23-25 to 3:1-10, the later can be seen as a separate narrative (e.g. Brown, 1966:xi, cxl). This allows us to mark 3:1 as the beginning of a new phase in the Gospel narration.

As for the markers, which could be considered as the end of the conversation, modern scholars do not share the same opinion.

Some scholars (e.g., Schnakenburg) in the heterogeneity of Jn 3:1-21 see traces of diverse materials of different origin, which are not always well gathered by editors of the text.<sup>2</sup> However, the fact that there are no manuscripts with a different structure of the third chapter indicates that

such a hypothesis is very unlikely. The wholeness of the first ten verses are not doubted by Schnakenburg and are taken as an indissoluble gist of the event.

It is also noted that the end of discourse between Nicodemus and Jesus is not marked by a monosemantic textual marker. On the basis of some signs, the most forcible of which is notification about displacement of Jesus with his disciples “into the land of Judea” (Jn 3:22), we can assume that in frames of the verses 1-21 Jesus stayed at the same place. This can serve as indirect evidence to attribute verses 1-21 to the dialogue. In addition, practically all interpreters agree that a new shift of the plot occurs with verse 22 (cf. Haenchen, 1984:198).

In this paper we do distinguish between the dialogue and monologue parts of the discourse while taking them as parts of one intended by the author of the narrative. After the ironic remark by Jesus in verse ten, the text raises twofold feelings. It seems that the dialogue changes to monologue. All indications of Nicodemus’ presence disappear: he does not ask questions nor does he interrupt Jesus. It brings some scholars to the conclusion that the second half of Jn 3:1-21 is an editorial insertion: Nicodemus didn’t hear the words, which are written after verse ten. Besides, if it is not appearance of Nicodemus in 7:50 and 19:39, he could have been a fictitious figure. Such a literary device of invented figure that plays the collective role of a group was widely used in proverbs.

The entire second part (the monologue) could have been pronounced by Jesus and also could have been written by an author-editor in addition to the dialogue of first ten verses. In whole it is commonly noted that the voice of the author of Jn and the words of Jesus are very intertwined. Hence Culpepper states: “The over-all effect of the similarity between the narrator’s and Jesus’ points of view, the relationship between narration and the farewell discourse, the narrator’s influence on dialogue, and the blending of voices in chapter three point to a complex relationship between Jesus and the narrator” (Culpepper, 1983:42).

The border of those two parts was marked in verse ten according to one weighty reason: the appearance in verse 11 of a participle and verb in second person plural (ὁ οἶδαμεν λαλοῦμεν).<sup>3</sup> This is the main remark that, in Bernard’s words “arrests attention” of scholars. He denotes: “the plural of majesty is not ascribed to Jesus anywhere, and in verse 12 He employs the singular εἶπον” (Bernard, 1928:109), and rejects opportunity of counting Jesus’ disciples onto the phrase as “markedly unlike the authoritative tone of the rest of the discourse” with the conclusion: “in verse 11 Jn. is not reproducing the actual words of Jesus” (Bernard, 1928:110). Haenchen is more precise in his judgment: “this last clause shows that it is the Christian congregation that is speaking and mounting a polemic against the Jewish community” (Haenchen, 1984:202).

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<sup>2</sup> Haenchen also denoted that “the text has been reworked” (Haenchen, 1984:199).



In this paper the passage Jn 3:1-21 is divided into two parts, the dialogue and the monologue, with most of the attention given to the dialogue.

**Part I. Dialogue (Jn 3:1-10)**

- 1-2: description of Nicodemus and his introductory words. The beginning of the dialogue;
- 3-4: Jesus' first refutation of the hidden in compliment oblique thesis of Nicodemus and misunderstanding of the later;
- 5-8: second statement of the divine sphere by Jesus I dialectic of sacred;
- 9-10: bewilderment of Nicodemus and irony of Jesus that brings readers to the introductory speech of Nicodemus.

**Part II: Monologue (Jn 3:11-21)**

The paper consists of three chapters. The first chapter examines the difficulties of interpretation by reviewing commentaries from both Western and Eastern branches of Christianity. In the second chapter, a short review of the Johannine theology is presented, since Christology and Soteriology have been the main planes in which interpreters have dealt with the passage. The third chapter relates to the text of the dialogue part. In expositional form, the passage is interpreted with linguistic analysis of the main concepts ("flash", "spirit" etc.). In Appendix I the researcher provides the list of the passages from the Hebrew Bible, which confirms the commonness of the opposition pair's literary device. The Appendix II provides the structure of the chosen passage Jn 3:1-10.

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<sup>3</sup> It seems that Ridderbos, though not stating it explicitly, uses the same criteria for division of this chapter in his theological commentary (Ridderbos, 1997:121-132).

## **Chapter I. Problematic of the traditional interpretation**

### **1.1. Historiography**

This chapter will provide an overview of the typical interpretations of the chosen passage. As it was noted in the Introduction, three major aspects will be examined. First, how do the commentators treat the flow of verses two and three? Second, what do they think about the meaning of the dialogue, and in what dimension (Soteriology, Christology etc.) do they find their hermeneutical key to the passage.

The researcher has chosen representatives from both Catholic and Protestant circles. Among the former is R. Brown (R. Schnackenburg's work will be discussed in the third chapter). The later are represented by L. Morris, C. Dodd and H. Cottrell. Commentaries of such scholars as Westcott, Bernard, Bultmann and Carson should not be missed. Their ideas as well as literature analysis by A. Culpepper and theological insights of H. Ridderbos will be mentioned in later chapters of the paper devoted to the concrete divisions of the passage. To our regret it is not possible to talk about contemporary Russian Orthodox interpretations because of their absence. Usually the authority of the Russian Orthodox Church uses interpretations of the Apostolic Fathers, reprinting translations of their works in Old Russian language. This is why the researcher will provide examination of those representatives of the Eastern Christianity, whose works are considered trustworthy in contemporary Russia. These are St. Chrysostom, St. Ephraim of Syria and St. Theophilact of Bulgaria.

From the early years of the Christian Church existence exegetes and commentators tried to reveal the meaning of the Bible in whole and of the Gospel of John in particular. Many different approaches were applied to the text in attempt to provide clarity to unclear meaning. One of the leading approaches was the allegorical approach which was widely used by the Alexandrian school of interpretation. However, with time it became obvious that a literal interpretation was preferred. The interpreters used the literal approach. Unlike modern commentators these interpreters were not bothered a lot by the textual critical questions. They took the text as the real divine word that required only exegesis. That is why it is not easy to find a thorough explanation of the terms in the commentaries of the ancient authors. They provided explanation of the meaning.

For example, St. John Chrysostom (†407) in his homilies on the Gospel of John discusses ethical and moral virtues and vices. In most of them the person of Jesus Christ stands as the central figure around which everything is explained. Approaching the third chapter of John St. Chrysostom clearly states that Nicodemus "had not yet set foot even on the thresholds of right knowledge... of the Only Begotten" (Chrysostom, Homily xxiv, 2). Thus, St. Chrysostom underlines Christological

character of the passage. This is how St. Chrysostom confirms this interpretation when talking about the meaning of Christ's answer in v.3: "Now what He saith, is something like this: 'If you are not born again... you can not have *a right opinion of Me*' (italic added — P.K.)" (Chrysostom, Homily xxiv, 2). St. Chrysostom does not touch such themes as coherency and other possible interpretation of the passage. Again, his purpose was to feed his people not with different variants of meaning but with one principle of living.

Another representative of the Eastern Christianity whose works are considered by the Russian Orthodox Church as classical is Ephraim of Syria (Ἐφραίμ ὁ Σύρος, IV AD). In his "Interpretation of the Four Gospels" he discusses the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in Christological borders. He comments on the four Gospels, which are harmonized by him in chronological order, forming what is usually called "Diatessaron." It is interesting that the conversation of Jesus with Nicodemus he limits by Jn 3:1-14 and situates this passage between Mt 21:19-22 on the one side and Lu 18:1-8 on the other.

One of the most telling passages that explains Jesus' question in Jn 3:10, Ephraim comments: "If only the images of the Son were not described before of His coming then the Lord would have been unjust requiring them from Nicodemus" (St. Ephraim, 240). Taking "from water and spirit" as a symbol of purification through the baptism, St. Ephraim notes that "if only before Son's coming the [mentioned] images were not drawn then the Lord's requirement from Nicodemus would not be just." We see that St. Ephraim in his interpretation uses typological approach to what is not explained in the text. In another paragraph St. Ephraim compares the situation of mute Zachariah with one of Nicodemus: "In the same way Nicodemus also had all those images before his eyes and he didn't believe; that's why the Lord told him accusation – but in humble way" (St. Ephraim, 241). The change of tone in verses two and three is taken by the commentator as something normal: Jesus knew better what Nicodemus needed. As with St. Chrysostom, St. Ephraim was concerned by the application of the spiritual sphere stated in the Gospel to the real world problems to which the figure of Christ was the only answer.

One of the most appreciated commentators by modern Russian Orthodox Church is Theophilact of Bulgaria (XI–XII AD). The fact that his commentaries on the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles were published in Russia with 25000 copies<sup>4</sup> confirms his highly respectful status in Orthodox circles. In his interpretation he takes Jn 2:23-25 as an introduction to the conversation in chapter three. The main problem of Nicodemus, according to Theophilact, is his improper faith. When dealing with 3:2-3, Theophilact says: "It seems that the words of Christ to Nicodemus have nothing in common with the words that Nicodemus said to Christ. But for an attentive one many

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<sup>4</sup> For comparison - common printout of any book in Russia nowadays, even fiction and detective bestsellers, does not exceed 10000 copies.

things will be revealed. Because Nicodemus had a poor understanding about Christ... the Lord says onto him – it's natural for you to have such a notion about Me" (Theophilact, 306). And after these words Theophilact keeps repeating the phrase "the notion about Me" as the central idea of all the phrases and words in the conversation. "The same way You, Nicodemus, do not see Me because have not been born spiritually... but have about Me a low notion." The question "what is meant by the birth?" is answered by the commentator as "the birth through baptism" and all questions by Nicodemus are taken as "the signs of unbelief" (Theophilact, 306).

Therefore, it is possible to see that Christological and Soteriological approaches to Jn 3:1-10 were the only approaches in those days. All that had been commented in those days was the figure of Christ and Soteriological application of the passage.

Above mentioned commentators could represent Russian Orthodox Church approach to Jn 3:1-10. Being part of the Catholic Only Church their approach contributed to both Eastern and Western Churches after 1054 AD. And now it is time to review some of the Western scholars both Roman Catholics and Protestants.

R. Brown — one of the worldwide known Catholic scholars of the New Testament, R. Brown made a great contribution to the Johannine studying<sup>5</sup>. In his first volume of "The Gospel According to John," published for "The Anchor Bible" series, Brown makes very thorough Introduction and provides not least detailed commentary on the Gospel. Interpreting Jn 3:1-3 he states that "commentators have noted that Jesus does not answer Nicodemus' question directly" and then provides his own argument: "the tactic of the Johannine discourse is always for the answer to transpose the topic to a higher level; the questioner is on the level of the sensible, but he must be raised to the level of the spiritual" (Brown, 1966:138). Thus he confirms traditional break between the words of Nicodemus and the reply of Jesus in verse three. As for the question of Nicodemus, Brown takes it "as an implicit request about entrance into the kingdom of God," i.e. as Soteriological issue. Soon he points as well to the Christological dimension in Jn 3:1-10 by the phrase "Jesus' answer is meant to show Nicodemus that Jesus has not come from God in the sense that Nicodemus thought (a man approved by God)" (Brown, 1966:138). But Brown in his commentary on the passage quickly moves from "the meaning that Nicodemus should have been able to understand in the scene *as it is portrayed*" to what is hidden in "baptismal orientation of the scene," i.e. in "Johannine liturgical preaching," confirming the traditional approach to the interpretation of this discourse.<sup>6</sup> When touching upon dubious phrases, Brown provides the spectrum of opinions and sometimes does not express his own.

<sup>5</sup> "We know of no Hebrew or Aramaic word of similar meaning which would have this spatial and temporal ambiguity" (Brown, 1966:130).

<sup>6</sup> Though after consideration of the possible connotations of the phrase "from water..." he admits: "when all these arguments are weighted, we find no certainty" (Brown, 1966:143).

Protestant scholars also contributed to the studying of the Fourth Gospel.

L. Morris is the author of a standard commentary on the Gospel of John in “The New International Commentary on the New Testament” series. In his thoughts about Jn 3:1-15 he underlines that “the conversation brings out the means of attaining eternal life” (Morris, 1996:184). Having stated that, Morris goes on to discuss the Pharisaic idea about salvation Ĩ “the careful observance of the Law and the tradition of the elders” Ĩ stressing that “all such views are wide of the mark” (Morris, 1996:185). The break in verses two and three is marked as follows: “Jesus declines to carry on with courteous exchanges that get nowhere, but plunges immediately into the very heart of the subject,” which lies in a presupposition that Nicodemus was “seeking instructions in the way to life” (Morris, 1996:188). Thus it could be seen that he is reflecting upon Jn 3:1-15 in Christological and Soteriological borders. Almost the same position is kept by Hendricksen, another representative of traditional Soteriological interpretation of the passage (see Hendricksen, 1995:129-145). He expresses another very common interpretation of the whole passage with its break as “an illustration of Christ’s penetrating insight into the secrets of the human soul” (Hendricksen, 1995:130).

C. Dodd — though written almost fifty years ago, his famous “The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel” is still a classical book in Johannine studies. Taking Jn 3:1-10 as an illustration to “the main truth” that “Christ has come to inaugurate a new order in religion” (Dodd, 1965:303) Dodd goes directly to the “rebirth” question comparing it with “Hellenistic mysticism”<sup>7</sup> and making the focus of the conversation right on the Jesus’ phrase. “The main theme of the discourse, then, is the passage of man out of the lower order of existence, the realm of σάρξ, into the higher order of existence, the realm of πνεῦμα in which alone ζωὴ αἰώνιος is his portion” (Dodd, 1965:304). Thus this scholar underlines Soteriological bias of the discourse. But these conclusions are made with the presupposition about tight connection of John’s phraseology with Hellenistic mysticism sources. Dodd does not put much attention to the relation of the concepts and literary means of Jn 3:1-10 with traditional Jewish phraseology. Besides, in attempt of such interpretation Dodd does not divide dialogue and monologue parts of the discourse 3:1-21.

The most original variation of the logical break problem, according to the researcher’s opinion, is the solution of H. Cottrell. Assuming the fault of Nicodemus in the fact that he started the conversation, Cottrell argues, “Nicodemus has assumed that his is the right to set topic,” because “normally it was almost certainly the more important participant who set topic for a conversation” (Cottrell, 1989:283). When moving to the fourth verse, Cottrell reminds his readers

<sup>7</sup> “If for πνεῦμα we substituted νοῦς, it would at once become clear how close we are to the widespread Hellenistic conception of the two orders of existence, the upper world (τὰ ἄνω) which is the sphere of νοῦς, in which alone dwell light and immortality, and the lower world (τὰ κάτω) which is the sphere of ὕλη or of darkness. Various forms of

“the complex repartee” with reference to Longacre, which allows him to state: “Of course what happens in the present example is that Jesus rejects the topics offered by Nicodemus and offers new topics as a challenge to the assumption made by Nicodemus *that he has the right to set topic*” (Cottrell, 1989:284). This type of solution still recognizes the break between verses three and four, and does not attempt to see the coherence of the dialogue.

Already from what is said in the previous review it is possible to conclude: traditional approach for both Western and Eastern Church interpreters deals with Jn 3:1-10 in the fields of Soteriology and Christology. According to the traditional approach the author of the Gospel is trying to reveal to his readers the essence and importance of the qualitatively new birth — “from above/anew/of the spirit.” This birth is important because the salvation of every person depends on it. In other words, the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus bears Soteriological meaning. Along the way Jesus reveals His nature – thus Christological dimensions of the conversation is obvious.

## 1.2. Weak points of the traditional approach

The traditional interpretation has its weaknesses. The main weakness is that the abrupt shift of the conversation in verse three is taken for granted. Let’s look at Smith’s phrasing of this common theory:

“Although Nicodemus approaches Jesus in a quite positive and affirmative mode, acknowledging that Jesus is a teacher sent from God and apparently willing to engage him in friendly conversation (3:2), he is seemingly brushed rudely aside (v. 3): unless one is born from above that person cannot see the kingdom of God (3:3). Jesus will not converse with Nicodemus on terms the latter assumes are shared. Something like a paradigm shift or conversion is required” (Smith, 1996:105).

Or as Andreas Kustenberger expressed it more strictly: “we discover that Jesus responds by not responding at all.” He came to this conclusion due to his conviction that “the decisive clues present in oral communication, such as tone of voice or facial expression, are lacking once the conversation has been reduced to writing. We are left with the challenge of drawing probable inferences from the available textual data” (Kustenberger, 1999:82).

What are the pro and contra to that discontinuity? First of all, almost all commentators underline this radical shift (as they consider it) and hurry to resolve it by referring to the “introduction” to the third chapter of John. That is the passage Jn 2:23-25 where it can be seen, they say, the real reason for the ongoing conversation in chapter three, which is now just a

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“Hellenistic mysticism” envisage the problem of man’s deliverance from ὕλη and his ascent to the realm of νοῦς, and

historical illustration of the principle in 2:25 – “He knew what was in man.” Or, using words of Govett in his *Exposition of the Gospel of St. John*: “Our Lord is here answering, not Nicodemus’ words, but his spirit” (Govett, 1891:78). The fact that John uses the same words and constructions in both passages (2:23-25 and 3:1-2) gives us right to consider those passages as one and the same narrative.

Still, this consideration does not determine the following discourse in Jn 3:1-10. It just gives us another hint onto Jesus’ supernatural ability and nature. It presupposes neither quick nor abrupt answer of Jesus, nor does it require that this following discourse demonstrate heart-penetrating skills of Jesus. All that could be said about this Introduction passage in Jn 2:23-25 can be limited to the statement: Jesus had abilities that were different from human’s ones.

Another problem in interpretation of the passage is that interpretative logic is lacking. It is hard to object that “commentaries are often quite good at explaining the individual propositions, and even (in the technical works) of giving detailed analysis of the possible relationship between one proposition and its immediately adjacent proposition, whilst much more rarely commenting on the ‘shape’ of the whole cluster, the structure of meaning relationship” (Cottrell, 1989:80). Many commentators do recognize a kind of succession in such terms and phrases as ἀνωθεν, ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος, but in their interpretations they try to find the origin of those phrases separately and in different sources. For example, birth ἀνωθεν becomes for Theophilact the water baptism which later is mentioned among τὰ ἐπίγεια in verse twelve “because it is held on earth” (Theophilact, 309). As for the “heavenly” things in Jn 3:12, Theophilact takes it as “the Heavenly birth by which The Only Begotten Son was born by The Father” (Theophilact, 309). This is not the only example. Modern interpreters also have a tendency to see answers in unanswered questions.

At that point another problem is raised. The words of Jesus in verse ten are a hint which helps to correctly interpret all the dubious words and concepts. For example, Carson comes to the conclusion that “Jesus’ teaching on the new birth was built on the teaching of the Old Testament” (Carson, 1991:198) on the basis of Jesus’ questioning “competence” of Nicodemus. Logic of such a conclusion is very simple: Jesus’ words are expression of “retort” (Carson, 1991:198) and “berate” (Carson, 1991:193), and should presuppose Nicodemus’ awareness of the matter. But at the same time Carson’s own solution is not much clearer. If in 3:1-10 “Jesus proclaimed truth the full significance and application of which could be fully appreciated and experienced only after he had risen from the dead,” as Carson takes it, then he falls into the same trap as those who he thinks misunderstood this passage! The trap is: Jesus’ reproach in verse ten (Carson even uses term ‘berate’) “suddenly sounds artificial and forced” (Carson, 1991:193).

### 1.3. Proposal of this research

It becomes clear that the frames and planes of interpretation should be widened. The researcher thinks that the whole discourse between Jesus and Nicodemus was provoked by the opening statement of Nicodemus. This starting phrase, which could be taken as a “compliment,” bears not only explicitly expressed information about Jesus, but also provides us some notions about epistemological presuppositions and beliefs of Nicodemus and the whole group of Jewish leaders which he represented. This passage could be divided into two main parts. First part, – Jn 3:1-10, – contains provoking in its expression argument which was made by Jesus in order to disprove epistemological presuppositions of Nicodemus and in order to bring him to the position where he would be able to comprehend the real issue. This part says practically nothing about Jesus himself, nor does it say something which could be used as guidance for practical implication to the life of a person. The only phrase of a Soteriological value is in verse five where the concept of “birth from water and spirit” becomes important for “entering” the Kingdom of God. The real Soteriological and Christological issues are represented only in the second part of this discourse, Jn 3:11-21, which is an explanation of the way of salvation made by Jesus. It is here where Jesus talks about Soteriological concepts of life and judgment; it is here that the Soteriologically colored title “Son of Man” appears and, which is important, the reader is given in concrete wording who, why and how will save the humanity.

For better understanding of the passage it is suggested by the researcher to use literature analysis of the words and phrases, and to underline following aspects: the formal one (what are the literary means which are used by the author), interpretative (what could be contained in the formal statements) and the point of coherency between phrases in the conversation.



## **Chapter II. Theological framework**

As it was seen in the previous chapter, commentators interpret the passage of 3:1-10 in either a Soteriological or a Christological plane. Such an approach to the text could be explained by a desire of the scholars to see in every narrative and even in each verse the reference to the goal of the Gospel of John, which is clearly stated by its author: “these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (20:31).

This definition consists of several variables, which the author is defining throughout the Gospel. The first and the most important variable of John’s theology, Ĩ “that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,” Ĩ is Christology. Christology is interesting for John more than anything else. It could be even said that author of the Gospel is interested only in Christology. However, it is author who forbids pronouncing such a bold statement. He proceeds with the words: “...that believing you may have life in His name.” Here the author adds a theme without which any Christology would have lost its sense Ĩ the theme of salvation, i.e. Soteriology. In fact, without application to people, any topic remains just a subject of abstract philosophy and irrelative speculation. Anthropocentricity makes the literary heritage expedient.

Hence, the main theological topics of John are Christology and Soteriology. It does not mean that there are no other themes in the Gospel of John. It just underlines the fact that all other themes, which are present in John, are subordinate to the main ones and should be discussed in their context. The chosen passage Jn 3:1-10 is not an exception.

### **2.1. Christology in John**

As was stated above, Christology is the central theme of John’s theology. It is made clear in different ways. The person of Jesus from Nazareth dominates the whole Gospel. It is Jesus who is called to have preexistent nature of God, who reveals the new commandment of love and promises to send “another Comforter” to His disciples. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, Jn has the distinctive mark of using diverse titles for Jesus of Nazareth. These titles are able to show whom Jesus was taken for by the author of the Fourth Gospel. These titles are used in special situations, which the author uses to reveal the person of Christ. Right from the first chapter of the Gospel we see that Jesus is called “the Lamb of God,” “the Messiah,” “Son of Man” etc. In Jn 3:1-21 we meet two of those titles: “Son of Man” and “Son of God.” Thus looking to the usage of those titles we will trace

how author of the Gospel understood Jesus, His role and His nature, i.e. Christology of Jn reflected in the segment.

### 2.1.1. Son of Man<sup>8</sup>

In Aramaic language the title “Son of Man” translates as “*bar nasha*.” This expression did not denote a special title and was just a common Aramaic phrase and was used for a creature of the human race. If, for example, a teacher started telling a story, he would have usually begun as follows: “Once upon a time there was a *bar nasha*” (Barclay, 1980:68). Note that John underlines the humanity of Jesus several times (e.g., 1:14; 19:34).

The way in which John uses this title presupposes that he saw in Jesus the eschatological figure that was described by Daniel. A majority of the passages in Daniel and Jn is used in the eschatological sense of the Messiah as the One who is sent. Since the Messiah will be sent, He will also ascend. This particularly is reflected in our conversation in vv. 13-14 (cf. 6:62; 8:28; 12:23, 34). There is another nuance of the title Ī it denotes a special anointment, i.e. special authority given by God (e.g., 5:27 – to judge; 6:27 – to forgive). The last mentioned example is interesting because there is an apocalyptic constituent of the title: the Father of “Son of Man” is God Himself! The same title is used by John in order to reveal the nature of Jesus. In Jn 6:53 a person’s salvation depends on the nature of Jesus: “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves.”

Of course, the appearance of this title in the context of our passage causes commentators to look at the whole discourse from Christological and Soteriological points of view.

### 2.1.2. Son of God and Only Begotten Son

Most scholars stress the fact that the pagan world was familiar with the idea of “Sons of God.” In many nations the rulers traced their origin to deities (e.g., Alexander the Great Ī from Zeus). Ancient world has many stories about heroes and demigods who called themselves “Sons of God” (Barclay, 1980:47). In the books of the Hebrew Bible we see how this title is applied to the angels (Job 1:6; 38:7)<sup>9</sup> and to the nation of Israel (Ex 4:22, 23; Hos 11:1).

In John’s theology it can be seen that this title becomes the central dogmatic vector that determines salvation of every person and possession of eternal life. For example, this title is put to

<sup>8</sup> See the review of this title in Dann, 1998:75-81.

<sup>9</sup> Along with that it should be noted that according to the testimony of the author of Hebrews, not a one angel was called by God “Son of God” (Heb 1:5).

the mouth of John the Baptist (1:34), Nathaniel (1:49), Martha (11:27) and Jesus Himself (10:36; 11:4). In all occasions the author describes salutary matters.

In all *Corpus Ioannum* the title “Son of God” represents a theological application of the phrase to the image of Jesus of Nazareth in order to underline not a heathen but rather a later Jewish understanding of the title in which the Son of God is identified with the figure of Messiah-Savior (see how it is reflected in Mt 26:63). In Jn 3:17 the title accompanies revelation of the nature of Jesus and the character of His mission.

As for the “Only Begotten Son,” this title, just like the former one, is called to reflect uniqueness of Jesus’ nature and, therefore, uniqueness of His relation with God, who is called “Father.” Four times this title is used in Jn (1:14, 18; 3:16, 18), with two out of the four appearing in the dialogue part.

We can conclude that the general title “Son” is used by John in order to describe “incarnation of Christ” (Enns, 1989:138) and very close relation of Jesus and God.

### 2.1.3. Light

This title belongs to the unique Johannine titles. Twice the author calls Jesus “the light” (1:9; 3:19), and three times Jesus applies this title to Himself (8:2; 9:5; 12:46). It is possible that, by using this title for Jesus, John created the antonyms: “light” – “darkness.” Jesus, therefore, is pictured as one who confronts “darkness” of this world and is a representative of “another” world, i.e. the divine sphere. The roots of this concept can be seen in the Hebrew Bible. There is a tradition of depicting God as One who dwells in the brightness of glory, i.e. in the light (cf. Ps 26:1<sup>10</sup>; Is 10:17; Ezek 10:4). It is the same in John where “Jesus does not show the way to the light; He is the light” (Enns, 1989:137).

This title also draws attention of scholars to a possible connection between the theology of John and the one of ancient Jewish tradition of wisdom. Such a succession is expressed, first of all, in similarity of the image of personified Wisdom in ancient Jewish literature and the image of Jesus in John. Among numerous aspects, which Brown highlights as demonstrative ones, we mark the following: eternal existence with God; coming from above to people; call to follow the Wisdom (Jesus).<sup>11</sup>

Thus, Christology is important not only in John’s theology revealed in the Gospel but also in theological plane of the chosen passage. All above-mentioned titles relate to the chosen passage

<sup>10</sup> All citations from the Book of Psalms are given in Septuagint numbering system.

<sup>11</sup> Detailed comparisons see in Brown, 1966:cxiii-cxxiv.

and its context of the third chapter. The manifold image of Jesus is not always obvious and monosemantic. Most of the times a reader sees Jesus as a teacher. John completes this image with the titles, which reveal Jesus in full. These titles are provided for the reader to understand not only who Jesus is, but also to comprehend the character of salvation Jesus brings.

As for the chosen passage of Jn 3:1-10, the only title "Rabbi" is applied to Jesus by Nicodemus. This title, according to the common opinion of commentators (see, for example, commentaries by Morris, Carson), characterizes not so much Jesus but rather attitude of Nicodemus.

## **2.2. Soteriology in John**

The theme of salvation is one of the main themes in the theology of John. John discloses salvation not only through the use of different titles for the Savior, but also the use of different concepts in order to convey the idea of salvation to his reader. The most important is the concept of faith or belief through which a person is going to be saved.

### **2.2.1. Concept of belief**

Guthrie points out that when John underlines the importance of faith, he tries to show that faith "was not merely a general faith but a particular view of Jesus which John sought to inculcate, a view of him under two distinct, yet closely connected ascriptions – the Christ and the Son of God" (Guthrie, 1990:284). The description of Jesus by John is done not so much in a historical aspect but rather a theological one, or as Dunn states "examination of historic Jesus in the light of the glory of exalted Christ" (Dunn, 1997:67). Importance of faith in verity of Jesus' words and His mission is stressed several times. The concept of "verity" or "truth" is important in John but it is just another descriptive term for faith. "Truth" in theology of John is "the object of learning, gnosis" (Dodd, 1965:170) and is the quality of faith.

According to Dunn's calculation, the verb "to believe" is used in John much more frequently than in any other book of the New Testament – 98 times (Dunn, 1997:66). Dunn considers this fact as not accidental. John does not use the noun "faith" and pictures this quality of a human being as a dynamic process and not as a static condition. Faith in John presupposes not just possession of information, but the act of making a decision. The object of faith in the Fourth Gospel, according to Kysar, is either Jesus, His words or the words about Jesus (Kysar, 1993:93). The first two of the mentioned place before any person a dilemma which causes them to answer the main question of salvation: whether or not to trust Jesus and follow his words. Dodd states: "Faith,

then, is a form of vision... Now that He [Jesus] is no longer visible to the bodily eye, faith remains the capacity for seeing His glory” (Dodd, 1965:186). That is why “faith” in John stands out as a criterion that divides all humanity into two categories: those who have received Jesus (in Jn it is conveyed by the word “believer” and in the Book of Revelation “faithful”) and those who have not. The question regarding the nature of faith remains open. Is it a result of human activity or does God give it? Kysar observes that “faith is ultimately a gift of God, but it is a gift for which humans alone are responsible to accept or reject” (Kysar, 1992-B: 928).

It is necessary to mention the role of signs in theology of John. The signs, as verse two testifies, brought Nicodemus to Jesus. Signs differ from miracles (a supernatural event) by particular semantic weight. This weight is in the meaning that is behind the sign. If a person does not comprehend this meaning, then he or she never gets anything definite out of the sign. Most of the times (if not always) the sign correlates with prophesy of Hebrew Bible times. In John’s theology the signs definitely assist the faith of people. However, according to Kysar, in order to comprehend the meaning of a miraculous event and, hence, to get profit out of the sign, a person should already have a kind of faith (see his arguments in Kysar, 1993:80-86). By thinking this way, Kysar points to an exclusive circle: “faith” – “signs” – “faith,” and resolves the problem through recognition of a preliminary faith. However, there is another approach to this circle: for comprehension of a sign’s meaning a person does not necessarily need faith, but just preliminary information (this is testified by John in his narrations). The sign, therefore, becomes a phenomenon of subjective order: everything depends on how an individual, based on his or her own preliminary knowledge (passages from the Torah, legends, stories etc.), interprets the sign and, hence, responds. This again underlines the personal character of salvation in John’s theology. That is why right understanding of the sign (not as a goal, but rather as a means of expression of divine will) makes the sign less and less important in the life of a Christian. The more one relates to God through faith to Jesus Christ, the more he or she understands God’s will.

Another peculiarity of faith in John’s theology is its tight connection with the sensible sphere of human nature. Faith, however strange it may seem, is in relation with senses and is based on them, but incomparably higher than just a sense. Jesus heals not just out of compassion, but also in order to awake faith (see numerous “and believed” after narratives describing sensual-physiological sphere events). The sensual verbs, which are used by John (“to see,” “to hear”) could be taken as semantic synonyms if they are called to affirm importance of sensual sphere versus different concepts about vainness of everything fleshly, including the feelings and senses. Kysar even defines sensual element in person as “*sacramental* in its importance” (Kysar, 1993:89). And in 3:1-10, as it was shown, some scholars trace the sign of sacramental importance of water baptism in the early Church. This leads us to the question of sacraments in John’s theology.

### 2.2.2. John and the issue of sacraments

The question of how clearly John reflects the state of affairs in the sacramental sphere of the early Church remains unclear, and is related to the doctrine of salvation. The absence of clearly stated sacramental symbols (which are, according to Brown's view, expressed symbolically) forces scholars to proceed from personal preferences and inclinations while defining the role of sacraments in John's theology. Absence of intertextual reference causes some of the scholars to use Church traditions in their speculations. For example, Niewalda, a Roman Catholic scholar, "has thrown aside as impractical the search for internal indications of the author's sacramental intent. He falls back on external evidence, namely, an indication in the early centuries that a passage of John was understood as symbolic reference to a sacraments" (Brown, 1966:cxii). With such an approach Brown himself agrees and underlines in Jn 3:5 the sacramental meaning of the phrase "begotten from water," i.e. water baptism (Brown, 1966:cxii).

While thinking of sacraments and their role in salvation it is important to remember what is clearly stated as the main theme in Jn. John wanted to show how people of the first century related to the events of Jesus' life. John underlines the main "thing" that unites all those who do not belong to the category of "witnesses" of Jesus' resurrection with the fruits of that resurrection, i.e. with the gift of eternal life. The main thing, as stated in Jn 20:31, is faith. That fact is able to eliminate interpretation of Johannine symbolism in terms of sacramental theology.

### 2.2.3. "Life" in John

The concept of life runs throughout John's Gospel, becoming a synonym for "salvation." It is the prevalent theme of the Gospel. In contrast to the other authors of the New Testament, John asserts that real "eternal" life should definitely be related with the Holy Spirit (see, for example, 7:38-39; 4:10-14; 6:63; 20:22). At that point it is noticeable that "life" is in tight dependence on Christology in John. "Life" for John is Jesus Himself, who like God has the source of life in Himself (cf. 1:4; 5:26; 14:6). Such a life is possible through an act from God that could be metaphorically compared with birth, but which is practically expressed in terms of belief (Jn 3:11-21). According to the chosen passage the whole divine sphere is involved. Moreover, in Johannine concept of "life" the Holy Spirit plays one of the main roles.

#### 2.2.4. Pneumatology

Even uneducated reader of the New Testament will quickly notice that Synoptic Gospels do not put so much attention to the teaching of our Lord about the Holy Spirit as the Fourth Gospel. Along with that it can be noticed that the terms “spirit” or “spiritual” often serve in John not to denote the third person of Trinity but rather for denoting divine sphere, which is totally different from the earthly sphere. It is testified by usage of the antonym pairs of words, where one constituent part is “spirit.” On the other hand, among the scholars and commentators of Corpus Ioannum there are adherents of other views. For example, Brodie tries to resolve the problem of descending of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and “presence” of the Spirit before Jesus’ resurrection by underlining that “the Spirit which is given, though it is God’s own Holy Spirit, is not something inhuman or alien. Rather, it comes from within a human being, from within a lived life” (Brodie, 1993:57). We tend to agree with Kysar who marks out four meanings in the word “spirit” (Kysar, 1993:107-108). But in 3:1-10 we see that “spirit” defines the whole divine sphere.

In spite of stressed attention to the bodily existence of Jesus (see 6:51-56), John in the same chapter records one phrase of Jesus that highlights the priority of the spiritual relation to God Ī “It is the Spirit who gives life” (6:63a). Again, he clarifies the notion of “spirit” right here in this way: “the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life” (6:63b). This shows us the accent of John onto the spoken word, on *kerugma*.

The most expressive chapters which deal with Pneumatology are 14 through 16 where the main attention is on the Holy Spirit and His role. It is there in Jesus’ speech we find some discordance in grammatical gender (“spirit” of neutral gender becomes masculine in 14:26: “ὁ δὲ παράκλητος, τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον”). We are left to conclude that the Spirit has personal characteristics.

John thoroughly underlines the function of the Spirit. The Spirit will “convince” (ἐλέγξει) the world “like advocate” (Enns, 1989:140), will remain in the disciples of Jesus and will teach them, reminding of what Jesus told (14:26). Transferring the question of Jesus’ words into the spiritual sphere, John accentuates the effect of the Holy Spirit, and by doing this he brings the problem of *ipsissima vox* into the sphere of divine responsibility. His readers, therefore, are not to doubt his authority and accuracy.

Idea of the Spirit as “the Comforter” is also a unique character in John. Kysar states: “the evangelist (and/or the Johannine community) sought to enliven and enrich the meaning of the Spirit by designating it with this new word Ī a word which captured and articulated more of the Christian conviction about the identity and work of the Spirit than was possible in more traditional language” (Kysar, 1992-B:929).

Thus, the divine spiritual sphere becomes in John the only possible sphere of relation with God. In this sphere a person can understand the Word of God, find salvation and be given strength and comfort in life. That is evident from the chosen passage Jn 3:1-10 especially verse six, where the principle of otherness of the human and divine spheres is stated.

### **2.2.5. Eschatology in John's theology**

In the Eschatology of John, it is necessary to mark out the Soteriological part. Commonly recognized is the notion which states that the gift of salvation, promised by God and related to the end of the world history, is already available for those who believe in Christ Jesus. Very demonstrative is the dialogue of Jesus with Martha where the concept of realized resurrection is underlined by John very neatly (Jn 11:23-26).

At the same time there remains a kind of ambivalence: realized and futuristic characters are adjoined together in John's writing in the most immediate context (see in 5:24-26 – realized eschatology and in 5:27-29 – futuristic one; 6:39-58 – mixed views of the resurrection). Such an ambivalence is absent in the Book of Revelation as well. The most distinctive feature of Eschatology that was adopted by the Christian Church from Judaism is recognition of linear and limited character of the history versus Hellenistic cyclic recurrence. In this type of Eschatology there is always a final point, "judgment," κρίσις, which will be conducted by the Almighty over all the nations.

On the contrary, the idea of "judgment" is expressed in the theology of John not in Jewish but rather in Hellenistic terms (see Brown, 1966:107-08). The question of the "judgment day" changed its chronological nuance into a more existential shape: the judgment could be forestalled in accordance to one's belief or unbelief. One of the significant parallel points that Jesus drew is between "judgment" over Israelites in the desert and the time of another "judgment" – time of His coming: "This is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light..." (Jn 3:19). The important difference between those two events is, according to John, the time of the judgment of God where the destiny of every person is at stake has already come. Here it is possible to see that the main themes of John's theology – Soteriology, with emphasis on Pneumatology, and Christology – are intertwined again.

### **2.3. Summary**

In this brief review of theological themes found in Jn 3:1-10, it is possible to see that all the main themes of John's theology are present. Unlike the other passages, Jn 3:1-10 does not contain the multiplicity of the titles, which in John's theology reveal the nature and the role of Christ. As in



the other passages, historicity serves in John an auxiliary role giving first place to the theological-didactical vector. For John the first importance is not in the details of the earthly ministry of Jesus, but rather “eternal values” which are enclosed in His words and teaching. In the chosen passage Jesus of Nazareth demonstrates one of the distinctive features – His ability to know what is hidden from the people, i.e. His affiliation with the divine sphere.

Soteriology in John is expressed in such terms as “belief,” “eternal life.” In other words, “Faith is the capacity to view experience from a peculiar perspective” (Kysar, 1993:86), and as a result it is possible to see the role of Jesus in one’s life. At that the paradox of the faith was noted: what or who the faith depends on – on the person or on God? Belief is tightly connected in John’s theology with the signs and miracles of Jesus which are called to become catalysts of person’s faith. A person who knew prophecies of the Hebrew Bible was to see in them the nature and role of Jesus as the Messiah sent by God. Only that step of faith is able to bring a person to receiving eternal life which is another theme related to Soteriology of John. The life is characterized by John not in chronological terminology (“future” or “present”) but in qualitative ones (“everlasting”).

Of course, salvation in John’s theology should be regarded in John’s view of such terms as “judgment.” This idea gets in John’s personal characteristics and should be considered by every person. Such an existential tint of practically all themes of John’s theology gives us the right to call John, according to apt definition of Brown, “an unconscious prophet of an existential approach to Jesus” (Brown, 1966:cxxvi).

### Chapter III. Analysis of the chosen passage Jn 3:1-10

The goal of this chapter is to show that the interpretation of the passage Jn 3:1-10 requires not so much Soteriological and Christological planes as Epistemological one, where the ability to know the divine sphere plays the main role. The literary analysis of the verses is called to underline the literary means, which are used in this passage to denote the theme of the dialogue part of the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus, as well as to disclose the coherency of the dialogue.

Before going to the text, it is important to mark that the following exegetic and linguistic research will deal with the text in its own terms as a description of a real conversation.

#### **3.1. Verses one and two: Nicodemus' premise**

- <1> Ἦν δὲ ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων, Νικόδημος ὄνομα αὐτῷ, ἄρχων τῶν Ἰουδαίων·  
 <2> οὗτος ἦλθεν πρὸς αὐτὸν νυκτὸς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Ῥαββί, οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐλήλυθας διδάσκαλος· οὐδεὶς γὰρ δύναται ταῦτα τὰ σημεῖα ποιεῖν ἃ σὺ ποιεῖς, ἐὰν μὴ ἦ ὁ θεὸς μετ' αὐτοῦ.

There is introductory information situated in the first verse. This information, according to the Gospel author, should provide to the reader enough data for understanding the preliminary state of affairs before the beginning of the dialogue. A man who belongs to the Pharisaic party and who is considered among his people as ἄρχων, i.e. “ruler” appears before the reader.

In the literature devoted to the Gospel of John and to the background of Jesus' life and ministry there is lots of information about both Pharisaic party (see, for example, Ferguson, 1993:480-87) and a possible meaning of the phrase ἄρχων τῶν Ἰουδαίων.<sup>12</sup> It is better for now just to note that the testimony about Nicodemus among “rulers and Pharisees” (Jn 7:50) gave him the right to talk to Jesus on behalf of the group, which determined the state of Jewish theology during those days. By that fact it is possible to explain the usage of first person plural pronoun both by Nicodemus (verse one: “οἶδαμεν”) and by Jesus (verse seven: “Δεῖ ὑμᾶς”).<sup>13</sup>

The second verse is the beginning of the conversation. Inherent to the Oriental manner of expressing praise at the beginning of a conversation, Nicodemus explicitly states at least two ideas. First, he shows respect to interlocutor. Culpepper correctly asserts: “In John 3 there is still no real opposition to Jesus, but the reader is given further guidance in understanding the meaning of acceptable faith and the ramifications of believing or refusing to believe” (Culpepper, 1983:90). This is confirmed by both the form of the address (Ραββί) and its meaning Ἰ recognition of Jesus

<sup>12</sup> In his translation of the phrase Brown even changes it onto “member of Saanhedrin” (Brown, 1966:128).

<sup>13</sup> Four possible interpretation of this plural pronoun see in Cottrell, 1989:280-81.

status as a teacher ἀπὸ θεοῦ. At that, the address is supported by reference to the signs, which Jesus performed. Such ability, as Nicodemus stated, was one of the indications that the person is really sent by God. As Jeremias contends: “Jesus was recognized not as a teacher-theologian (Mk 1:22 and parallels) but rather as a *charismatic leader*, and the common opinion of Him stated: he is a prophet. It is this opinion had been repeated among the people (see Jn 4:19; 6:14; 7:40, 52; 9:11)” (Jeremias, 1999:97).

The form of the verb ἐλήλυθας might indirectly testify that Nicodemus was neither going to talk about the time of appearance nor about the origin of Jesus. Using perfect tense, Nicodemus underlines just this: he is addressing Jesus, as He appears to Nicodemus at the moment of conversation – a man who had performed signs.

It is on this explicit level that practically all of the commentators stop interpreting the verse, leaving beyond the scope of their concern one of the details which, according to the researcher’s opinion, is implicitly stated in the words of Nicodemus, and which is able to shed some light onto the coherence of the whole conversation. Among the commentators only Westcott notices something hidden in this verse. “There is however a symptom of latent presumption in the word (“we know”). Nicodemus claims for himself and for others like him the peculiar privilege of having read certainly the nature of the Lord’s office in the signs which He wrought” (Westcott, 1882:48). Brown also recognizes that there is something implicit but only refers to it as an “implicit question” (Brown, 1966:136). Unlike Brown’s opinion, this phrase is better treated as an implicit statement. So, the matter of the statement lies not in recognition of Jesus as a “teacher” from God (as, for example, Brown and others underline) or of the status of Christ (see above mentioned Westcott’s “Lord’s office” who interprets this “presumption” in Messianic context, as a “recognition of a divine mission of Jesus”<sup>14</sup>) but in presupposition which was under the probable recognition. This could be disclosed if the phrase by Nicodemus is a form of the address, which is known as “compliment.”

Compliments have long been used in speech. This is reflected on the pages of the New Testament as well. Compliments are mainly used in the beginning of a conversation when either side is unsure of a friendly atmosphere. An episode in the Book of Acts, where Apostle Paul appears before the Greek auditorium, could serve as an example (see Acts 17:18ff). Starting his speech, Paul says: “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects.” Here it is important to notice the typical details in such situations. First, the context helps to see that relationship between the speaker and audience is not very friendly (see vv. 18 and 20). Second, in his introduction, Paul first underlines the positive qualities of the audience (“you are very religious

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<sup>14</sup> Westcott, 1882:42.

in all respects” v. 22), and then confirms that he himself shares some of their views (“what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you” v. 23).

Therefore, with a compliment, one of the sides of conversation expresses its kind intentions and also its desire for an open dialogue. It is done, as it was noted above, either by underlining the favorable qualities of the interlocutor or by recognition of the speaker’s weaknesses and imperfections, which in turn emphasize virtues of the interlocutor as well.

At the same time the compliment has another function: it conveys not only the status of the addressee but also the status of the speaker. The matter is that a compliment is valid and effective only when its content corresponds to the status of the speaker. In our case with Nicodemus, the status of Jesus as the one who “was sent by God” could be confirmed only by one who was not the least among the circle of teachers and who has criteria, which allows him or her to determine “saindness” characteristics. Therefore, when Nicodemus confirmed that Jesus is considered to be a teacher ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐλήλυθας, he expressed another statement, which relates to the circles represented by his figure. This statement could be stated in following way: we (all who are represented by Nicodemus) have the criteria in accordance with which it is possible to say who or what may be from God, and, hence, who or what may not be from God.

So, the first two verses convey what Nicodemus (and the Pharisees) thought about Jesus at that time, and also their theological position. Ferguson correctly marks that “at any given time it would be possible to find Jews believing almost anything and everything, and this is especially true at the beginning of the Christian era... It could even be argued that Judaism was more a matter of ‘orthopraxy’ than of ‘orthodoxy’” (Ferguson, 1993:502). In this context the emphatic “οἶδαμεν” tells about the state of official theological circles in Judea whose representatives practically thought that they figured out the “mechanism” of God’s work through observation of the manifestations of the divine sphere (in our case through miracles). In other words, they saw the divine sphere as quite accessible for understanding. Kataphatism of the represented type of theology is obvious.

In the history of humankind, the notion of Creator played one of the main roles in determining the many aspects of human existence. The idea of a power that willingly influences the course of human life (whatever form it is embodied to) gradually raised another idea: the attempt to understand the sphere of divine power.

The problem of understanding of divine sphere can be traced to the earliest available documents. This problem was radically considered in a small essay, which turned out to be very important for the whole development of the Christian understanding of divine — “About Mystical

Theology” — “Περὶ μυστικῆς θεολογίας” possibly by Dionisius Areopagitus.<sup>15</sup>

The author of that work proposed two possible ways of doing theology. The first is the way of confirmation: *kataphatical* (καταφατικός - affirmative), or positive theology. He states that this way is not perfect because it leads us to a partial knowledge about God. This approach is based on the presupposition that the Creator gave us not only the ability to get a “feeling” or a notion about His existence, but also a mind that is able to penetrate, to see and, finally, to grasp a “mechanism” of the divine sphere. In this approach one uses positive expressions for descriptions of God and His realm.

The second approach is the way of rejection: *apophatical* (ἀποφατικός - negative), or negative theology. It asserts that our mind is the mind of the creature and thus too finite to define this mysterious realm of divine existence in positive terms. Besides, any type of understanding has as its object what does exist. God is beyond the sphere of anything that exists as being created. The only way it is possible to say something about God and His plans is to focus our attention on the question “what is *not* God?” and, step by step, to eliminate from this “infinite formula” all “parts” that are not related to the divine sphere. By doing that we have no risk of misunderstanding Him and, finally, we narrow down the circle of His “presence.” This approach uses negative terms for description of the divine sphere. It is, by evaluation of Lossky, “the general sign of all theological tradition of the Eastern Church” (Lossky, 1991:22) and is widely used by Russian Orthodox theologians.

So, as it might be seen, Nicodemus represents the first  $\bar{\Gamma}$  positive  $\bar{\Gamma}$  approach to the description of the divine sphere. Along with that it should be stated that this approach was not typical for Judaism. As Ferguson correctly observes: “Jews emphasized God’s holiness and transcendence” (Ferguson, 1993:503). But again, according to the statement of Nicodemus, one may assume that in that period of development and socio-political situation, some circles in Jewish authority, which were represented by Nicodemus, could have at least felt the opposite.

To know what “is from God”, as stated above, presupposes another side of the saying to know what is not from God. Besides, the position of ἀπὸ θεοῦ in the sentence is emphatic. Thus, the structure of the sentence might confirm the hidden premise of Nicodemus.

The phrase “from God” has a very broad semantic field. Practically everything that people possess might be legitimately included into this phrase. Concepts of blessings (Gen 14:19), wisdom (Gen 40:8), and destruction and healing (Deut 32:39; 2 Chron 25:20), good and evil (Job 2:10), i.e. everything including salvation (2 Sam 23:5; Ps 48:16; 61:2) might be included in this list because everything depended on the Most High.

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<sup>15</sup> In fact, the author is rather unknown. The theory that ascribed this document to Apostle Paul’s disciple Dionisius of Areopague has a very telling weakness: until the beginning of VI AD nobody mentioned it. And only after almost five

It is the phrase ἀπό θεοῦ, which is ruled by οἶδαμεν and its implicit meaning of the possibility to understand the divine sphere that is taken as starting premise for the development of the conversation.

### 3.2. Verses three and four: Jesus' response

«3» ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Ἀμὲν ἀμὲν λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μή τις γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν, οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ.

«4» λέγει πρὸς αὐτὸν [ὁ] Νικόδημος, Πῶς δύναται ἄνθρωπος γεννηθῆναι γέρων ὢν; μὴ δύναται εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ δεύτερον εἰσελθεῖν καὶ γεννηθῆναι;

In the verse three the first doubled “ἀμὲν” which plays emphatic function appears. Those words are repeated in the chosen segment two times (three, when including the wider borders of the conversation).

When talking about functional characteristics of this phrase, Jeremias asserts: “In the Gospels ‘amen’ is pronounced always as an introductory word to strengthen the speech. This unique word-usage has place only in Jesus’ phrases... in John it is always doubled.” At this point Jeremias defines the meaning of the phrase in analogy with the prophetic formula of the Hebrew Bible “This says the Lord” and states that it “means that prophetic words are not their own wisdom but the divine message. Accordingly, introduction of the words of Jesus “ἀμὲν λέγω ὑμῖν” is the expression of His authority” (Jeremias, 1999:53).

Importance of the double “amen” finds itself in the subordinate clause of purpose where the key word is the verb γεννηθῆ. This verb also refers to the divine sphere.

The passive form of the verb is a typical example of this construction, which is called *passivum divinum*. Jeremias says about its origin and function this way:

Though today there are no any materials or special research, it is possible to assert that in later time in Palestine *passivum divinum* remains if not the strict distinctive feature then at least one of the characteristics of apocalyptic literature... it had been used not only out of reverence to the name of God, but first of all for the veiled description of the mysterious deeds of God in the end of time (Jeremias, 1999:29).

Discussion of the question whether the word means “either ‘to be born,’ as of a feminine principle, or ‘to be begotten,’ as of a masculine principle” is not the purpose of the paper. Yet it is hard to object to Brown’s conclusion that “the same two meanings are possible for the Hebrew root *ylḏ*” (Brown, 1963:130). Another point is that there is no doubt that in this context the word is used in figurative sense: “Joh<sup>1</sup> stands very close to Hellenistic Judaism... in his training in allegorical

exegesis” (Schnackenburg, 1980:125). The text seems to affirm such a suggestion. Somewhat allegorical exegesis is found in Jn 3:3-5 where Jesus refers to the initiating act on behalf of the divine realm by the word “to be born.”

So, if it might be supposed that Jesus used this device with that particular reason, then here “to be born” tells about an action by God which influences a person in a way so that this person gets something which allows the person “to see the Kingdom of God.” To denote this action Jesus uses a notion of “birth.” In his commentary on the Gospel of John, Bernard denotes that “the idea of rebirth is not peculiar to Christianity,” and provides some examples from Gentile and Rabbinic sources (Bernard, 1928:clxii ff.). In spite of the main usage of this word, it is clear that here it is used in a figurative sense. What is the exact meaning of the sense? Neither John nor Jesus explains it in those verses. They leave just an idea that Nicodemus (just like any other person) needs intervention from God which could be compared in its significance with birth, if, of course, Nicodemus has a desire “to see the Kingdom of God” or, using the words of Nicodemus himself “to know ... (what is) from God.” In that respect, there is not only Soteriological but also Epistemological plane in this dialogue as well. Both *passivum divinum* and vocabulary of those first verses testify that another theme might be involved into the conversation, i.e. the theme of the divine sphere. Thus, there might be a succession point between the phrase of Nicodemus and the statement of Jesus.

However, as it was shown in the first chapter, commentators usually prefer dealing with the change of the course of conversation in terms of a logical break.

At that another detail, which helps to see the succession in this segment, should be noted. Two verbs ἵεἶδον and οἶδα ἵ have a very close connection. The matter is that both terms are derived from the same root *FIΔ* (Metzger, 1989:57). The verb “to know” means to get a notion about seen. It could be illustrated by several passages in the Hebrew Bible where God opens people’s eyes for them to see (Gen 21:19; Num 22:31; 2 Kings 6:17, 30; Is 42:7). It is worth noting that in every case objects of God’s influence got to know something very important often related with their salvation. So, the idea of seeing with God’s help in the Hebrew Bible is tightly connected with the Epistemological plane as well as with the Soteriological one. In John’s case the object of the verbs is also connected with the idea of salvation. Thus, it seems that Jesus responds by using the premise of Nicodemus. And we have a very interesting structure:

3:2	α	οἶδαμεν	
	β	ἀπὸ θεοῦ	
	γ		ἐλήλυθας
3:3	γ’	ἐὰν μή τις γεννηθῆ	
	β’	ἄνωθεν	
	α’	οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν	

As practically all commentators note, the adverb ἄνωθεν could be interpreted as both “again” and “from above.” Advocates of the first preference point to Nicodemus’ response, which can tell us the natural reaction of a listener contemporary to Jesus (cf. Erickson, 1999:800). On the other hand, adherents of the second approach of interpretation state: “Jesus’ meaning was ‘from above’.” Brown goes on and argues, “this is indicated from the parallel in iii 31, as well as from the two other Johannine uses of ἄνωθεν (19:11, 23)” (Brown, 1966:130). Culpepper also notes that “the character of the misunderstanding as a misinterpretation of an ‘earthly’ metaphor with a ‘heavenly’ meaning is implied by a later response: ‘if I have told your earthly...’ (3:12)” (Culpepper, 1983:155). However, those two views could be reconciled if we assume that Jesus had been using the word in both senses: He pointed both to an act that in its essence could be compared with a new birth, and to a qualitative aspect of this act’s origin ἴ from above. It is very probable that Haenchen is correct in asserting: “‘From above’ means the same thing as ‘from God’ in Jewish parlance of that time” (Haenchen, 1984:206). Possible connotation of ἄνωθεν and its relation to the divine sphere will be explored further in this chapter. But for now this word is another evidence of the divine sphere theme presence.

At this point it is hard to say whether we should understand τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ as indication of an institution that is based by God, or the reference to the process of God’s reigning.<sup>16</sup> “The Kingdom of God” is mentioned in Jn only twice, and both times ἴ in Jn 3:1-10. If we take into account the course in which the conversation will go, and also the major purposes of the author of Jn, which are expressed in Jn 20:31 and maintained in each episode of the Gospel, then the phrase “to see the Kingdom of God” could be interpreted as a metaphor which expresses not only the concept of salvation but also the traditional Jewish notion of the divine sphere.

The following table demonstrates interpretation of those two verses according to Nicodemus’ hidden premise:

Verse	Formal plane	Semantic plane
2	οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐλήλυθας	We are able to determine what could be from God and what could not.
3	ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν, οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ	The first statement of the thesis. Requirement of an action on behalf of the divine sphere for getting ability to get notion of this sphere.



Thus, in this segment the theme is not salvation as it seems at first sight, but development of an issue that deals with epistemological presupposition, which was implicitly pronounced by Nicodemus and metaphorically confronted by Jesus.

Nicodemus holds the conversation on the level of premises, which are expressed explicitly. At the same time, it is not easy to conclude from his reaction in verse four how he interpreted the thesis of Jesus. It seems that he correctly caught the notion of importance of the event described as “birth” but took it rather quantitatively than qualitatively. The author of Jn intentionally uses words or expressions with ambiguous meaning. Culpepper states:

One of the distinctive features of the Gospel of John is the frequency with which its secondary characters misunderstand Jesus. These misunderstandings may be characterized in general terms by the following elements: 1) Jesus makes a statement which is ambiguous, metaphorical, or contains a double-entendre; 2) his dialogue partner responds either in terms of the literal meanings of Jesus’ statement or by a question or protest which shows that he or she has missed the higher meaning of Jesus words; 3) in most instances an explanation is then offered by Jesus or (less frequently) the narrator. The misunderstandings, therefore, provide an opportunity to explain the meaning of Jesus’ words and develop significant themes further.<sup>17</sup>

One of the examples of the model described above is found in verse four. Herbert Leroy has produced the most extensive study to date of misunderstandings in John. Through form-critical analysis he defines the Johannine misunderstandings as concealed riddles. There are only 11 such passages, all in Jn 2 Ī 8.<sup>18</sup> Cottrell provides his explanation: “obtuseness reflects the psychologically understandable reaction of Nicodemus to the rebuke implied by Jesus’ rejection of topic as offered by Nicodemus” (Cottrell, 1989:285).

Another point that should be noted is the form of Nicodemus’ answer. If one puts attention to the form of the fourth verse, it is easy to notice that Nicodemus uses the form of parallelism for stating his idea: he asks a question, and right away provides objection to his own question. By doing that Nicodemus turns the rhetorical question into an ironical one.

α	πὼς δύναται...
β	γεννηθῆναι
α΄	μὴ δύναται...
β΄	γεννηθῆναι

The second expression characterizes the previous statement, and functions as irony. This follows from the fact that the rhetorical question (verse 4a), which presupposes the negative answer, is followed with the answer, as if a listener is not able to answer this obvious question. It

<sup>16</sup> Research of the Kingdom of God topic see in Jeremias 1999:48. He, by the way, gets this phrase as *ipsissima vox* of Jesus.

<sup>17</sup> Culpepper, 1983:152.

should also be remembered that rhetorical questions have their connotative function: they attach to a text strongly pronounced emotional color.

Thus, in verses three and four the dialogue takes polemical direction. The theme of the polemic is hidden in Nicodemus' first phrase. It relates not only to the "we know" concept but also to the object of this knowledge ĩ the divine sphere. It is this nuance which could serve as a connection point between Nicodemus' statement in verse two and Jesus' phrase in verse three, and also a connection point between verses three and four:

Verse	Formal plane	Semantic plane
3	ἐὰν μή τις γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν, οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ	Requirement of an action on behalf of the divine sphere for getting ability to get notion of this sphere.
4	μη δύναται εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ δεύτερον εἰσελθεῖν καὶ γεννηθῆναι	Misunderstanding of qualitative character of the action as the quantitative one.

### 3.3. Verses five through eight: Dialectic of sacred

#### 3.3.1. Verse five

Ἔπειτα ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς, Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μή τις γεννηθῆ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, οὐ δύναται εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ.

The fifth verse contains a repeated "ἀμὴν ἀμὴν" that serves as a textual marker of the conversation. In this verse the thesis of Jesus, which was stated first time in verse three, is repeated as well. This fact, along with the lexical succession of verses three and five, might testify to the sequential role of the sentence. The difference in the fifth verse is the change of ἄνωθεν into ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, and change of the verb ἰδεῖν into εἰσελθεῖν. The clear parallelism of those verses and appearance of ἄνωθεν in verse seven allows us to conclude the synonymous character of each pair of notions.

In addition to previous notes about ἰδεῖν it is worthy to underline another aspect of this verb. The verb ἰδεῖν belongs to the verb of sensual perception. The author of the Gospel often uses such terms. According to Kysar's opinion, the abundance of such verbs is evident of their role in the sphere of belief. In John, thus, experience is tightly connected with the question of faith and, hence, salvation (see Chapter II). This "empirical" dimension might well explain the change of ἰδεῖν into εἰσελθεῖν. However, Jesus could perfectly use the lexical units used by his interlocutor.

<sup>18</sup> Culpepper, 1983:153.

Nicodemus, who misunderstood Jesus' words, probably tried to sneer at Jesus' idea when asking the rhetorical question with an unacceptable answer for any sober person: μή δύναται εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν ... δεύτερον εἰσελθεῖν καὶ γεννηθῆναι (3:4).

As it was underlined in the former partition, Nicodemus uses the structure of parallelism. In his answer to Nicodemus, Jesus takes up the second stanza of Nicodemus and expands it, combining the chiasmic structure:

3:4	α	εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν τῆς μετρὸς
	β	εἰσελθεῖν
	γ	καὶ γεννηθῆναι
3:5	γ'	γεννηθῆ
	β'	εἰσελθεῖν
	α'	εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ Θεοῦ

The answer of Jesus was absolutely a serious one. Jesus, answering and using the same verb that describes the way of entering the divine sphere, made a kind of equality between the ironic εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν... εἰσελθεῖν and the complicated εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ Θεοῦ. Such a succession again underlines the importance of Jesus' idea. It could be seen that Jesus consistently tries to announce to Nicodemus His idea, and uses all available means, including both the terminology of his interlocutor and the poetic expression of the idea.

The next change in the second repetition of Jesus' thesis concerns the adverb ἄνωθεν. The meaning of ἄνωθεν had earlier been marked as polysemantic "from above/again." The difficulty is to determine the sense or denotation of this adverb in immediate context of Jesus' speech.<sup>19</sup>

When referring to the word-usage of ἄνωθεν in Septuagint it seems that, the majority of the time, the word is used in connection with "heavens," i.e. with the divine sphere, and characterizes that which dwells not in humanity's sphere but in the sphere of divinity. For example, in Gen 49:25 where the author drives at the blessing of Joseph, ἄνωθεν is used to underline the sphere from which the blessing should be awaited Ἰ from God. The author of the Book of Job, when conveying the feelings of the main character (i.e. Job), also uses ἄνωθεν for describing the sphere in which, according to the author's opinion, God dwells (see also Gen 27:39; Job 31:2; Ps 49:4; 77:23; Pr 29:18; Is 32:15; Lamentation 1:13). The same could be seen during analysis of the word usage in the New Testament (Lu 1:78; 24:49; Jn 19:11; Jack 1:17; 3:15, 17).

Taking into account the chiasmic arrangement of the two notions in verses three and five, the semantic field of the phrase ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος could be narrowed to the notion that is synonymous to ἄνωθεν. Different interpretations, which are represented in the works devoted to

<sup>19</sup> "Denotation is the term used for the relationship which exist between words and the corresponding entities in the world" (Cottrell, 1989:83).

this passage, widely vary.<sup>20</sup> Charles Dodd draws a parallel with the phrase “to become a child of God” which is stated in Mt 18:3 as a criterion for entering the Kingdom of God, and notes that “by ‘receiving the Logos’ that man gains the right to be God’s child. This effectively dissociates the idea of rebirth, in the Johannine sense of the term, from all mythological notions of divine generation ... of Hellenistic society” (Dodd, 1965:305). But again, in Jn 3:1-10 there are neither such terms as “Logos,” nor “receive” ἵ connection with them is a sign that the reading is based on doctrinal assumptions. All such allusions are nothing more than just a common way of taking the passage in the Soteriological plane. That is why throughout his commentary Dodd defends the evangelist’s vocabulary from that of the Hellenistic origin, and keeps guarding John’s focus on Christ and the Christian doctrine of salvation from that of Gnostics.

Some scholars see in this phrase reference to the importance of water baptism. “For Jn 3:5 teaches that the Spirit is bestowed in baptism,” says Beasley-Murray in his sacrament oriented approach to the verse (Beasley-Murray, 1972:221). In reply to such interpretation, Bernard reminds “John expressly distinguishes the baptism of John which was ἐν ὕδατι only from that of Jesus which was to be ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ (1:33)” and objects: “if Jesus in the words of Jn 3:5 recommended to Nicodemus that he should submit himself to baptism by John, He ascribed a spiritual efficacy to that baptism which was unknown to John’s own adherents” (cf. Acts 19:2) (Bernard, 1928:clxv).

Appearance of ὕδατος in this verse is explained by referring to the theme of physiological birth of a person where “water” is called to denote the amniotic fluid. Dunn also mentions a possible allusion of this word-combination to the clarifying power of the Spirit as it could be seen in passages of Is 44:3-5 and Jacob 36:25-27, or 1QS 4:20-22 (Dunn, 1997:209). The third variant of interpretation, adopted in this paper, makes the accent in the phrase “of water and spirit” on ὕδατος, taking πνεύματος for a descriptive noun ruled by “water.” This is possible if the phrase is hendiadys.

“A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature” defines hendiadys as “the coordination of two ideas, one of which is dependent on the other” that “serves in the NT to avoid a series of dependent genitives” (Blass, 1961:§442). For example, hendiadys could be seen in Acts 23:6 “περι ἐλπίδος καὶ ἀναστάσεως νεκρῶν” which is translated as “on account of the hope of the resurrection of the dead” (Blass, 1961:§442). As it could be seen, idea of resurrection depends upon the idea of hope. “While observing the problems of grammatical structures in the original text,” ἵ notes De Waard, ἵ “we underline the fact that the reason of those problems is hidden in incongruity of the surface form and a deep-laid meaning.” As an example, he cites Rom 1:5 (δι’ οὗ ἐλάβομεν χάριν καὶ ἀποστολήν...) and explains: “formally we have a

<sup>20</sup> See good exposition on the variety of interpretation in Carson, 1991:191-196.

coordinating relationship. But in fact this is a subordinating one, because apostleship is content of the grace, i.e. apostleship of Paul is a gift of God” (Waard, 1998:161).

In our case, the phrase formally fits the definition. There is a preposition and two nouns connected by “καὶ.” According to the structure, in this pair of nouns the notion of “water” is clarified through an additional idea of “spirit.” If we assume that hendiadys plays a role of genitive relation, then the phrase could be transformed into a genitive construction “water of spirit” or “spiritual water.” Such understanding of the phrase could be confirmed by the following argument.

In the language used by the author of Jn, the elaboration of the Spirit theme (i.e. Pneumatology) by using “water” metaphor is obvious.

In the narration about Jesus’ conversation with a Samaritan woman, a comparison with water appears from a situational context. The meeting and discourse happens at a well where Jesus asked the woman to drink (Jn 4:5-15 especially verse 14: ὕδατος ...εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον). From the context it is seen that Jesus talks about non-material things. But the metaphor remains without explanation: neither author nor Jesus explain it.

The second time the metaphor of water is introduced by John is when he describes events in Jerusalem where Jesus asserts: “Ἐάν τις διψᾷ ἐρχέσθω πρὸς με καὶ πινέτω. ὁ πιστεύων εἰς ἐμέ, καθὼς εἶπεν ἡ γραφή, ποταμοὶ ἐκ τῆς κοιλίας αὐτοῦ ρεύσουσιν ὕδατος ζῶντος” (Jn 7:37-38). In this case it is noteworthy that the author himself gives the interpretation of the phrase ὁ ὕδατος ζῶντος as a reference to the Spirit: τοῦτο δὲ εἶπεν περὶ τοῦ πνεύματος (7:39). It is important to note the similarity of the metaphors and the reason of their usage. In both cases I with the Samaritan woman and in His speech in Jerusalem I Jesus compares the spirit with water. It is also important to notice that the theme of “water” appears in Jn 3:1-21 only once, and that is in verse five. It is hard to clearly state the meaning of the phrase in this context. Note that the author of Jn edits the traditional material according to his goals and thus controls the flow of the narration. In this case it could be supposed that the phrase with “water” is a passing phrase, i.e. does not play the main role and just supports the main idea expressed in other sentences.

However, it should be stressed that Jesus regularly uses Nicodemus’ terms and images for His purposes. Thus, it might be probable that here in verse five Jesus draws another parallel with Nicodemus’ ironic image of natural birth. In that case, appearance of the “spiritual water” may well be paralleled with amniotic fluid of Nicodemus’ γεγεννηθην (δεύτερον) in verse four.

On the other hand, the theme of the spirit gets further development beginning with verse six, and then in a more unfolded way in verse eight. It seems that in the case of Nicodemus hendiadys ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος could be interpreted as a metaphor that is called to underline the non-material nature of the notions mentioned by Jesus. Thus the word γεννηθῆναι is characterized

by a spiritual water and, therefore, loses any concrete meaning. Jesus expresses a very vogue idea which is clearly rooted to the divine sphere.

Besides, keeping in mind the stated didactic character of Jn, it is highly improbable that the author of Jn expresses the concept of salvation through a vogue metaphorical phrase. Even if we accept the interpretation of this phrase in the light of Ezekiel 37, the passive form of γεννηθῆναι makes it useless to discuss the human part in this mystical action. In parallel with Ezekiel, this verse would have only meant another prophesy about the future action of God. Therefore, if this action depends only on God, the only advantage of hearing those words is just knowledge, or possession of information. This again might point to the idea that Nicodemus' premise about the divine sphere required correction.

The only thing to be concluded from verse five with certainty is that Jesus contrasts two concepts: ἄνωθεν and non-ἄνωθεν. In other words, He contrasts the sphere of God and the sphere of humankind, which will be more clearly revealed by further verses of the dialogue.

Verse	Formal plane	Semantic plane
4	πῶς δύναται... γεννηθῆναι μὴ δύναται... γεννηθῆναι	What are you talking about?
5	ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἔξ ὕδ. καὶ πν, οὐ δύναται εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ	To belong to the divine sphere one should experience an action on behalf of that sphere.

### 3.3.2. Verse six: otherness

<6> τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τῆς σαρκὸς σὰρξ ἐστίν, καὶ τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος πνεῦμά ἐστιν.

The sixth verse could be called the beginning of Jesus' argument, which clarifies the usage of such concepts as "spirit" and "birth." The author does this with help of another literary device, which was widely used among the biblical authors and is called in our paper the device of antonymic pairs or dualistic couples.

The sixth verse of the third chapter of John is usually taken as an example of what is commonly called "dualism." Originally this term signified a teaching that recognizes two equal though totally different principles Ī spirit and flesh, ideal and material. There is another type of dualism, gnoseological, that contrasts the subject and the object of knowledge. In application to religious sphere, dualism means opposition of two independent higher powers or deities. These powers differ in their nature: one is the personification of the good and the other of bad. Lexically

pairs of antonyms which are called to underline “otherness” of the compared ideas, express dualism.

Pairs of antonyms are quite common in John’s Gospel and are considered witnesses to the presence of dualism. Kysar comments: “Of course, such pairs of opposites are not unusual in the New Testament or in the Hebrew Bible. What is unusual in our Gospel is their prominence” (Kysar, 1993:60). In verse six dualism is represented by the nouns σάρξ and πνεῦμα (“flesh” and “spirit”). Throughout the Gospel there are opposite couples that can testify to the dualistic worldview of the author. For example, the concept of the judgment in Jn 3:19-21 is described by the author through metaphorical usage of the pair “light” and “darkness” (τὸ φῶς and τὸ σκότος). Such distinctive features used to be considered characteristic for Eastern Gnosticism. As it was noted by Dunn, they “were deeply rooted in Palestine of Jesus’ times though in the form of a Jewish sect” (Dunn, 1997:321).

While expressing such dualistic worldviews, there is transition of abstract notions into the sphere of contrasting concrete images. This is possible because every word has different types of lexical meanings. The most common way to categorize word meaning is distinguishing basic (most commonly used) and metaphorical ones (are based on associative relations with the basic meaning). It is the second, metaphorical meaning that is used in Jn 3:6 and other passages, which contain pairs of antonyms. This second meaning is very common for Biblical lexicon. Numerous anthropomorphisms, which reflected the level of understanding of God by the authors of Hebrew Bible books, are examples of such a word usage.

Such opposition of the antonyms can symbolize not dualistic perception of the world but rather division by the author of different spheres of human existence. For example, it could mean the attitude of the author to the moral-ethical sphere: “This distinction is between two ways of understanding oneself in relationship to the whole of reality — between two ways in which a person might answer the question, who am I?” (Kysar, 1993:62). Bultmann says, “John’s concepts, light and darkness, truth and falsehood, freedom and bondage, life and death, come from Gnostic dualism” (Bultmann, 1951:17).<sup>21</sup> Culpepper lightens another nuance of such attitude: “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 eventually make their choice” (Culpepper, 1983:104). “Cosmic” dualism might represent just another device of expression of the human dualism. In Kysar’s opinion it could symbolize two different worlds † the world of people and the world of divinity. “Those two realms are a poetic way of expressing the conviction that the humans must

<sup>21</sup> Though further Bultmann distinguishes between Gnostic dualism and the one of John: “... The cosmological dualism of Gnosticism has become in John a *dualism of decision*” (Bultmann, 1951:21).

choose either to live under the rule of God or try to escape that rule. The two-story cosmos of the Gospel of John would then be a metaphor for human lifestyles" (Kysar, 1993:63).

However, in the passage 3:1-10 John's dualism might be titled "ontological" instead of "cosmological." The difference might be clarified this way: whereas the latter presupposes countable parts (there were at least two "eons" or "ages," as well as "worlds" in Jewish and Hellenistic religious thought), which come one after another or which coexist in parallel spheres (i.e. not interchangeably), the former type emphasizes not so much their chronological or spatial difference but their ontological "otherness" which allows them to interrelate with each other and still remain "two different spheres" of existence. In ontological dualism it is possible to talk about synchronous or concurrent existence of what is initiated by God and of what fell away from Him. Only ontologically it is possible that "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn 1:5). Thus, "to come to the light" in Jn 3:20-21 does not mean geographical expedition or eschatological expectation but the quality of one's heart, i.e. one's attitude to God's will.

The term "ontological" better emphasizes qualitative character of John's dualistic pairs. In relation with this understanding, it is easier to grasp qualitative character of other concepts in John, such as "eternal life" or "birth from above," "birth from the spirit" versus "birth from the flesh." By "ontological" the researcher means not Gnostic understanding where spirit and flesh are not only absolutely different entities but also are in harsh opposition to each other so that it is not possible to talk about their "friendly" coexistence. Taken in such terms "spirit" becomes the principal requiring the elimination of "flesh." In this passage the pair "spirit" Ĩ "flesh" denotes divine and human spheres correspondingly. Ridderbos marks that correctly: "'Spirit' does not denote the great ontological anti-flesh principle but God himself as the source of life (cf. 1:13) and above all in his restorative and life-renewing power as the only possibility left to humans to save them from lostness and alienation from God and to give them eternal life" (Ridderbos, 1997:131).

In antonymous pairs of John it is possible to see the presence of dualistic tendencies either of the author or of personages who operate those pairs. Appeal to the literary tradition of the Hebrew Bible contributes to the interpretation of opposite couples. Contrasting pairs of concepts are typically used when one does not know how to convey a piece of information. The following story will illustrate this principle.

One of the inhabitants of the Arctic Circle was brought to a southern city in his country. When he visited a zoo, he saw a crocodile for the first time in his life. He had never seen such a beast, nor had he heard such a word "crocodile." When he had gotten back to his tribe he tried to tell his people about everything he saw. However, when he tried to tell people about the crocodile, he could not express his ideas and was not able to describe the animal. Finally, he exclaimed:



“Well, do you know a polar bear?” “Yea” — people told him in reply. “A crocodile is totally different!” stated the man. The same could be seen in the usage of the contrasting pairs in the Hebrew Bible books.

Another thing should be added before referring to the Hebrew Bible passages. The commentators who cite those passages in order to find a parallel to the difficult notions in Jn 3:1-10 may be mistaken: the diachronic method of word study does not guarantee that the usage of the same words in Jesus times was the same. The researcher uses diachronic approach not to the word meaning study but to the usage of a literary device throughout the books of the Hebrew Bible. The fact that the same usage of opposite pairs is found in different books (both chronologically, in authorship and in genre) allows the researcher to assume that the usage of the opposite couples device in Jn shares the same purposes.

One of those couples is “heaven” – “earth” (οὐρανός και γῆς). This couple of antonyms is the most common one in the Hebrew Bible. Such a frequency is explainable; one of the widely discussed themes is the theological one, where the notion of “heaven” is a metonymic transfer.<sup>22</sup> In other words, every book in the Hebrew Bible canon is connected with the person of God and His attributes. Questions like what are God’s will, God’s character and spheres of His dwelling are raised in different forms. In order to answer those questions and make the figure of God as close to a man as possible, authors of the books use different means. One of those means is description of the divine sphere in terms of opposition couples of antonyms.

The idea that God is not like a human being is common not only for the Jewish mindset but also for other nations. The means for denoting the divine sphere reflect similarities in the notion of otherness between God and people as well as between heavens and earth. Eliade calls this “the dialectic of sacred” (Eliade, 1999:16). Elaborations of his lectures on the History of Religion are summarized in the following paragraphs.

First of all it should be noted that any religious system represents complicated phenomenon with the goal to interpret the surrounding world. Different objects, for example, heavens, sun, moon, earth, i.e. what Eliade calls “the first matter of the mythological thinking” (Eliade, 1999:16), helped people to express the mystery and secrets of objective reality. It is quite clear, though, that all those characters or images were not just a shape that conveyed the depth of human thinking but expressed inward dialectic of sacred for which the nature serves as a means of expression. This could be proven through the commonness and unity of those shapes of expression among many different nations throughout time.

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<sup>22</sup> It is “a figure in which the name of an attribute or adjunct is substituted for that of the thing meant” (Cottrell, 1989:132).

Any language, including the one that expresses the mystical sphere, is never stable. During its development, many terms in that language start to polarize. A criterion for such a polarization is in the spheres of sacred and profane. In this process people choose for images of sacred those objects and ideas which contain in themselves something that is beyond human understanding and knowledge. Eliade specifies: “such witnesses we call *hierophanies*, because each of them opens before us a particular side of sacred” (Eliade, 1999:46).

In hierophanies, Ī relation to the divine sphere as expressed by pairs of words, Ī there is always opposition of what is expressed by tangible terms accessible for sensible perception, and what is expressed through intangible, insensible terms. Such dialectic of hierophanies underlines strict distinction of a described sacred object from all the other objects. Something always stays out of the sacred sphere and such a remainder always is present in any language.

Besides, the presence of a force that is seen in manifestations of the nature makes a person think of himself or herself in a new way. That is why Eliade introduces another term Ī “kratophany.” That kratophany enriches a person’s existence and provides a clue about ontologically different level of existence that produces a desire to get this force under control.

It is not difficult to admit that the sacred sphere reveals itself in things or symbols and still remains hidden from human comprehension. It never appears in its fullness and wholeness. Thus, from an objective point of view, a sacred stone of a tribe and an epiphany of the Almighty in Judaism are equally true (or illusive) because in both cases the sacred reveals itself in creature form and thus limits itself.

Eliade illustrates:

In the Hindu mystical school *Vaishnava* there is a doctrine that attributes the entry of Vishnu into an idol as a Soteriological event. Deity in its great love toward people reveals itself by receiving “defective” form of existence that is peculiar to sinful person. However, there also is a theological goal: “materialization” of a deity demonstrates its *freedom* and ability to get any form. Besides, it testifies about incomprehensible and paradoxical essence of sacred, which is able to be congruent with the profane without any loss for its own way of existence.<sup>23</sup>

That is why one of the main symbols of another sphere of existence, which directly reveals its transcendence, power and sacredness is heaven. Simple observance of the vault of heaven wakens in human beings religious feelings. Heavens are immense and exalted. It is something absolutely different and “other” in comparison with the territory of people’s existence. Such transcendent symbolism of heaven is derived from a mere understanding of its unlimited and fathomless height. That is why one definition of deity is “the Most High.”

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<sup>23</sup> Eliade, 1999:77.

From examples provided by Eliade (1999:114-27), it follows that heavenly deities could be called the most widespread deities in the world.

As with the transcendent symbolism of heaven, the same could be said about anything high, i.e. those things which are in immediate closeness to heavens. “Hights” and “hills” are equalized with the transcendent, i.e. with the sphere of deity. This can explain the fact that in the Hebrew Bible times there were rites on mountains, and stories about ladders between heaven and earth (i.e. between sacred and profane). Importance of those ceremonies is rooted into their affiliation with the sacred meaning of everything that is close to the heavens. That is why, according to Eliade’s conclusion, transcendent sphere reveals itself to a person through “high” and “sublime.” In spite of the fact that forms and symbols of a deity’s representation change, the sacred meaning of heaven remains everywhere.

This is true to Judaism with its notion of the Almighty God and His attributes. His heavenly hierophanies constitute the core place of the religious experience in Judaism. For example, the Most High displays His might in thunder and wind (see 1 Kings 19:11; Ps 106:25). After the Flood, God “signs” with a rainbow His covenant with Noah not to destroy the earth again. The text shows “otherness” of God in interesting opposition pairs: “I set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth” (Gen 9:13) and parallel: “This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that is on the earth” (9:17). We see how the profane sphere is identified by the term “earth” and “flesh,” while “cloud” denotes the sacred, divine sphere.

Such contraposition of heavenly and earthly objects is widely used in Jewish literary tradition. Often these pairs are used to convey the idea of totality and wholeness. Here are some examples of such opposite pairs in the Hebrew Bible.

Deut 3:24 – “...for what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as Your?” This rhetorical question presupposes only one answer: nobody, because the pair of antonyms includes the whole world. The same idea with the same means is expressed in Deut 4:39 – here the author confirms our interpretation with a clear statement: “there is no other.” At the same time the might of God is the main idea of this verse.

In the Book of Psalms God is exalted “above the heavens” by attributing to Him the glory which is “above all the earth” (Ps 56:6, 12). This particular case is noteworthy because the author not only contrasts “heavens” and “earth,” but he also situates them in parallel lines. In Ps 72:25 the psalmist exclaims that there is no one like God which he “has ...in heaven ...desire ...on earth,” i.e. nowhere. The fact that God is unspeakably high and mighty, and that everything glorifies Him, is confirmed by the psalmist in parallelism in a familiar way: “how majestic is Your name in all the

earth, who has displayed Your splendor above the heavens” (Ps 8:2). The same poetic device is used for description of God’s glory in Hab 3:3.

There are some passages in the Hebrew Bible which contain expressions conveying the idea of otherness of two notions. Often, if not always, those passages relate to the divine sphere description where God is an object of perception. Neusner noted one such passage: “...human beings were created from the dust (Gen 2:7) to which he is to return when he dies (Gen 3:19). This seems to imply that humans, from the very outset, are weak and transient creatures, contrasted to God, who is eternal” (Neusner, 1999:1437). Again, such an oblique reference to the difference of human from God is present in other passages with opposition of antonym pairs.

In this group of pairs the main focus of their authors was to highlight the notion of God’s “otherness.” However, sometimes the pairs are incomplete. In those cases the verses denote only one part of the presupposed opposition while another is implicitly seen in the sentence. All of them distinguish two different sides in the same world: the sacred and the profane. Here are some examples.

One of the most important passages is in Is 31:3 –

Now the Egyptians are men,	Αἰγύπτιον ἄνθρωπον
and not God,	καὶ οὐ θεόν
and their horses are flesh [בָּסָר]	ἵππων σάρκος
and not spirit [וְלֹא רוּחַ]	καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν βοήθεια

It is interesting that Septuagint changed abstract notion of “spirit” into the more comprehensive terms “help” or “support.” This conveys just pragmatic rhetoric without giving important theological premise, and does not reveals the Jewish understanding of the divine sphere. The importance is in the fact that in this example the couple “spirit” Ἰ “flesh” stays in a synonymous parallelism with the couple “person” Ἰ “God.”

From the formal plane of the passage it could be seen that author wants to highlight the idea that regardless of all their strength the Egyptians are not the strongest power in the Universe. The author does this with the help of two pairs. In the first pair he juxtaposes Egyptians (“a person of Egypt” in the Septuagint text) to God. In the second pair he talks about their military strength, which, as it is well known, had a powerful cavalry. If contraposition “flesh” Ἰ “spirit” is taken in the context of the second line of the verse, then its meaning is not clear. Connotation of each part of the couple is very difficult to pick out. This is possible if only we take into account the first, main line of the verse. In this case we have an interesting opposition with parallel synonymous doubling. Poetical-theological idea of the author could be expressed this way: “Egyptians according to their nature, are people that are ruled by God; and their strength is in correlation to God’s strength, as

flesh correlates to spirit, i.e. beyond any comparison.” Further context of the chapter clarifies this thought by underlining beyondness of God and almightiness of His power.

Such a usage of “flesh” was also noticed in Dead Sea scrolls.

“Theological Dictionary of the New Testament” (ed. By Gerhard Kittel) presents a thorough analysis to the usage of both “flesh” (vol. VII) and “spirit” (vol. VI). There is no need to recite in this paper elaborately all the meanings of those two concepts. In the paragraph “The Concept [of “flesh”] in the Dead Sea Scrolls” he marks an essential peculiarity for the term “flesh”: “the situation thus far may be summed up as follows. Apart from passages in which the concept flesh is neutral, man both collectively and individually is flesh in his total creaturely existence. Bound up with this term is his creatureliness, his sinfulness, and his defective understanding of God’s saving acts and plan of election” (Kittel, 1968:114). Further it is stated, however, “nowhere is it even probable that the flesh is in conflict with the spirit” (Kittel, 1968:114).

Such a conclusion from analysis of the Dead Sea Scrolls corresponds well with above-mentioned example from the Book of Isaiah. The author of Isaiah conveys a conceptual idea. Of course, he talks about concrete historical events and nations. However, amidst the words about superiority of God above the enemies of Israel, the author intertwines opposition of two notions, i.e. “flesh” and “spirit” as two ontologically (qualitatively) diverse spheres. “Flesh” is called to describe the sphere of people and “spirit” the sphere of God, the divine sphere.

In talking about God’s commandment in Deut 30:12, it is stated “It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’” Rhetoric of the author’s opponents (“who will go up...”) presupposes futility of any effort to fulfill the commandment of God. Patrick Miller comments: “It is almost as if the failure of the people so to act, which is implicit in this covenantal speech, raises the issue of whether or not they *can* do so” (Miller, 1990:215). It is significant that the proposed “answer” to the “problem” denotes the “up” dimension with implied answer “nobody.” Therefore, impossibility of observing the commands from God is underlined by the fact of transcendence of God. Thus, it could be seen that the notion of heaven is used in its metonymic sense and stands for the divine sphere.

Some more examples are in the Book of Isaiah. In Is 55:8-9 the contrast of people to God is represented by a very telling antonymous pair support. People are as different from God “as the heavens are higher than the earth.” In Is 64:1 the author of Isaiah prays for mercy and help: “Oh, that Thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down... .” Again, the notion of heaven as the divine sphere is confirmed.

The only example of the idea of “otherness” that is expressed by an opposite pair consists of names of different animals and is found in Is 11:6-9:

“And the wolf will dwell with the lamb,  
 And the leopard... with the kid,  
 And the calf and the young lion...  
 Also the cow and the bear...  
 And the nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra...”

Again, the author takes examples from his life experience and, in order to convey the idea of a different world, he uses incompatible pairs of animals which are not able to coexist in peace. Thus author says that there will be an absolutely different world, not like ours.

Most of the times such examples could be seen in the poetic books of Psalms and Job where God's accommodation is expressed in terms of heavens. “ὁ κατοικῶν ἐν οὐρανοῖς” Ἰ denotes Septuagint in Ps 2:4. In Ps 13:2 it is stated, “the Lord has looked down from heaven...” (see also Ps 17:10; 112:5, 6).

In Ps 102:11-12 the idea of God's ability to make what is impossible for humans (i.e. characteristic of God's otherness) is represented by two opposite couples: “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness... as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.” And in Ps 113:24 the author expresses the spheres of humans and God in this way: “the heavens are the heavens of the Lord; but the earth He has given to the sons of men.”

The Book of Job stands in the row of books which explicitly state the idea of God's otherness and transcendence. The author of the book uses antonym pairs to describe the limits of God: “they are high as the heavens, what can you do? Deeper than Sheol, what can you know?” (Job 11:8). Again he uses the same device with different words: “Behold, I go forward but He is not here, and backward, but I cannot perceive Him” (Job 23:8 with additional “left” and “right” couple in verse nine).

Finally, it is important to mention another example from the Book of Daniel. This book is important for the chosen passage in John not only because the title of “Son of Man” appears in its context. The second chapter of Daniel provides a parallel to the contrast of flesh to the heavenly realms of the divine sphere.

In that chapter Nebuchadnezzar poses to Daniel a riddle which seemed to be insoluble. The local magicians and sorcerers replied that the riddle could not be resolve by no one “except gods, whose dwelling place is not with mortal flesh” (2:11). Note the opposition of gods and flesh in their words. When Daniel heard the riddle, he also expressed the same opposition: “However, there is God in heaven...” (v. 28). Daniel denoted the difference of “otherness” between human (“flesh”) and the divine sphere (“heaven”).

Thus, it is possible to conclude that pairs of antonyms were widely used in the Jewish religious tradition irrelative of the literature genre and time of the writing. The same practice of

poetic expressions was also common in the time of Jesus of Nazareth. In our case it is the contrast of two notions: the birth of spirit and the birth of flesh. It could be reduced to the opposition of the concept of πνεύμα and the concept of σάρξ, which expresses idea of otherness of the human sphere and the divine sphere.

“That God is invisible to the bodily eye was a fundamental principle of Judaism (Ex. 33:20; Deut. 4:12)” (Bernard, 1928:30). This statement of Bernard denotes the common agreement among scholars of Judaism. Bernard goes further and asserts that “Jn is especially insistent on the doctrine that God is invisible, cf. 5:37; οἴτε εἶδος αὐτοῦ ἐώρακάκατε, and (a passage closely parallel to 1:18) 6:46, οὐχ ὅτι τὸν πατέρα ἐώρακέν τις, εἰ μη' ὁ ὢν παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ” (Bernard, 1928:31). These passages belong to the explicit statements of the doctrine. However, there are many other devices which also represent that particular notion. Unlike clear phrasing, those passages appealed to the deeper spheres of the human soul by their poetic structure and wording. Such a passage is the sixth verse of the third chapter of Jn.

Each line of verse six represents one and the same statement but is related to different spheres. One is denoted as a sphere of σάρξ, and the other as a realm of πνεύμα. The meaning of those lines is very similar in its essence to the premise of Aristotle in *De Anima*, I.404:17 “γινώσκεσθαι γὰρ τὸ ὅμοιο τὸ ὅμοιον.”<sup>24</sup> It seems that Jesus conveys the principal of ὁμοουσιος, which, when taken as a parallelism, represents an ontological difference between πνεύμα and σάρξ.

From the formal point of view, the type of dualism that is represented by this pair of notions could be characterized as ontological. This could be confirmed both with immediate context where two notions are used, and with the general development of the narrative where the original statement of Jesus undergoes different lexical changes and becomes “the second” birth in Nicodemus words in verse four ([γεννηθῆ] δεύτερον), then becomes ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος in verse five, and, finally, “τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος” in verse six. The below given table helps to see this change and the fact that it does not stop in verse six:

Verse	Lexical transformation of the main idea
2	ἀπὸ θεοῦ (ἐλήλυθας)
3	γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν
4	(γεννηθῆ) δεύτερον
5	γεννηθῆ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος
6	τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος
7	γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν
8	ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος

<sup>24</sup> Cited by Dodd, 1965:16.

The contrast of two terms “flesh” and “spirit” is confirmed by Ridderbos who also provides another hint for interpretation of this aspect: “What is meant here by “flesh” can best be illumined with the aid of 1:13, where being “born of God” is opposed to being “born of blood, of the will of the flesh, of human will” (Ridderbos, 1997:128).

If this development of Jesus’ thesis is taken into account, the accuracy of the researcher suggestion (the theme of the verse is in contrast of two ontologically different spheres) becomes very possible. First, it should be noted that the answer of Nicodemus in verse four was not correct. It is this mistake of Nicodemus’ interpretation, which led to the second statement of Jesus’ thesis that might reveal that Jesus is not talking about just another birth. In fact the situation is the opposite: there is a substantial difference between human birth and a birth ἀνωθεν. The difference between γεννηθῆναι ἀνωθεν and (γεννηθῆναι) δεύτερον is not explained plainly. Yet the persistency with which Jesus continues to express His thesis through vague expression γεννηθῆναι ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος that later changes into τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος testifies that all those terms are the phenomenon of one and the same value and nature. An impression is made that Jesus is trying to explain to Nicodemus (and John I to readers) what is meant by the thesis about ontologically new change of human nature. As Bultmann stated: “The expression ‘to be (or be born) of ...’, which makes it seem as if John attributed a man’s condition to a man’s *being*, in which his condition is founded” (Bultmann, 1951:23). Again, nothing concrete has been said about what that birth means. The conversation goes on presuppositional premises of Nicodemus (“we know” what or who can be “from God”) and of Jesus (what is from God, i.e. τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος, is not accessible for humankind sphere, i.e. τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τῆς σαρκός). Using the phrase of Culpepper, “the dualism between that which is from God and that which is not is thereby established, so being ‘from God’ has more spiritual than spatial connotations. God is the reality beyond, the transcendent presence” (Culpepper, 1983:113).

Verse	Formal plane	Semantic plane
6	τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τῆς σαρκός σὰρξ ἐστίν, καὶ τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος πνεῦμά ἐστίν.	There is ontological difference between the sphere of human and the divine sphere

### 3.3.3. Verse seven: the third statement of Jesus’ thesis

<7> μὴ θαυμάσῃς ὅτι εἶπόν σοι, Δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι ἀνωθεν.



This verse represents the third repetition of Jesus' statement. The thesis of Jesus underwent some changes and took its original form:

Verse	The form of Jesus' thesis
3	Ἀμήν ἀμήν λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μή τις γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν...
5	Ἀμήν ἀμήν λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μή τις γεννηθῆ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος...
7	Δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν.

As it is obvious from the table, the doubled “amen” is rightfully equated by scholars with the mark of the importance in Jesus' speeches. In verse seven Jesus repeats His thesis for the third time. However, here He uses the verb “δεῖ.”

Another thing to be noted is the hidden question of Nicodemus between verses six and seven. It seems that Nicodemus had not expressed it verbally, ἴ the author of John is accurate in recording even the little nuances in conversations (e.g. verse nine). Starting with verse six it is possible to state that Nicodemus displays the lack of understanding. That is the first indication of the end of the dialogue. As stated before, any dialogue is possible if both sides share the same vocabulary and presuppositional ground. Here Nicodemus seemingly displays the lack of both.

The plural form of the pronoun (ὕμᾶς) reflects the collective character of Jesus' phrase. It is possible to see that Jesus proceeds with using that character through all the dialogue: τις (v. 3), ἄνθρωπος (v. 4), τις (v. 5), τὸ γεγεννημένον (v. 6), presupposed συ in ἀκούεις (v. 8) ἴ all those subjects share collective and inclusive character. By doing that Jesus clearly opposes Himself to the humankind. Again, it is ontological otherness that does not allow to those who belong to “earthly,” “fleshly” to understand “heavenly,” “spiritual.”

Another detail that testifies about implicit question on behalf of Nicodemus is that Jesus goes on providing an example of His thesis. This leads the dialogue to verse eight.

But again, with this phrase Jesus adds nothing to the meaning of the previously stated sentences. As in the beginning Jesus uses the same metaphor of “birth” which relates to the notion of “above.” Thus, He “closes the loop” of the idea onto the divine sphere.

Verse	Formal plane	Semantic plane
7	Δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν.	The third statement of the thesis.

### 3.3.4. Verse eight: Jesus' illustration

«8» τὸ πνεῦμα ὅπου θέλει πνεῖ καὶ τὴν φωνὴν αὐτοῦ ἀκούεις, ἀλλ' οὐκ οἶδας πόθεν ἔρχεται καὶ ποῦ ὑπάγει· οὕτως ἐστὶν πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος.

Verse eight presents another difficulty: how οὕτως is related to the formerly stated example.

Haenchen concluded his observation of this verse with the proposition: “Verse eight is perhaps intended to assert that one cannot understand one who is born from above. In that case verse nine would follow on very well” (Haenchen, 1984:201). Carson follows him: “The person who is ‘born of the Spirit’ can be neither controlled nor understood by person of but one birth” (Carson, 1991:197).

It is important to notice that any metaphor (in this case the metaphor with τὸ πνεῦμα) is not an adequate reflection of reality. It is not appropriate to imply all the nuances of a metaphor to the real affairs. The main problem with such an interpretation is that the subject of the implied person's (e.g. Nicodemus) miscomprehension in verse eight is not ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος but τὸ πνεῦμα. This interpretation could be correct if the last line of verse eight was: οὕτως ἐστὶν πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τῆς σαρκός.

A better way of looking into the passage is to follow the structure of the text. From the formal perspective, the characteristic of the spirit (ὅπου θέλει πνεῖ) should be connected with the characteristics of a person born from the spirit, and the characteristic of the implicitly expressed “you” (standing as a generalizing pronoun like in vv. 3, 4, 5), i.e. disability totally comprehend the spiritual realm Ἰ with (in our case) Nicodemus who stands for those who are “born of flesh.” Both participants who relate to the metaphor (the implicitly stated one who hears and but knows not and the one who is born of the spirit) have the point of relation in their attitude towards “τὸ πνεῦμα” and not to each other. It is “the spirit,” which states characteristics for both of them. The topic of the conversation and hence of this example with “τὸ πνεῦμα” is not Nicodemus as a representative of the “fleshly” world and his attitude to the one who is “from spirit.” It is rather disability to (see below why) understand the divine sphere that is represented by the word “spirit” in its fullness for those who belong to the “fleshly” realm. Those who are born from the spirit share not so much the freedom of τὸ πνεῦμα as the ability to know πόθεν ἦλθον καὶ ποῦ ὑπάγω, i.e. everything about the divine sphere. It is obvious that the implicit premise of Nicodemus about “knowledge” in verse two is confronted, and the main idea of the metaphor is to underline the qualities of the divine sphere Ἰ its otherness. In fact this could be illustrated by chiasmic structure of the argument of Jesus

which starts in verse six (bold font underlines the characteristics of the spiritual and italics added to highlight the characteristics of one who is not born of the spirit).

Thus, the one who experiences the action on behalf of the divine sphere (i.e. God), which could be metaphorically compared in its importance with the natural birth, does not only “hear the voice” (i.e. the result of the manifestation of the divine sphere) but gets ability to know everything about this sphere. Moulton notes that “‘hear a voice’ (accusative) is confined to perception” (Moulton, 1976:76).

- <6> τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τῆς σαρκὸς  
 σὰρξ ἐστίν, καὶ  
 τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος  
 πνεῦμά ἐστιν.
- <7> μὴ θαυμάσης ὅτι εἶπόν σοι,  
 Δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν.
- <8> τὸ πνεῦμα ὅπου θέλει πνεῖ  
 καὶ τὴν φωνὴν αὐτοῦ ἀκούεις,  
 ἀλλ' οὐκ οἶδας  
 πόθεν ἔρχεται καὶ  
 ποῦ ὑπάγει.
- οὕτως ἐστίν  
 πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος.

There is another poetic device of antonym pairs usage in verse eight. This idea of totality (to know nothing) follows from the antonymous couple πόθεν ἔρχεται καὶ ποῦ ὑπάγει. This pair of opposite words represents one of the traditional Jewish literary devices that were widely used to denote the notion of totality and wholeness (see the list of the pairs from the Hebrew Bible in Appendix I). The closest parallel in the Hebrew Bible is found in Psalms (120:8). It is the blessing of a psalmist, who testifies that God is steadfast. The author wants to say: whenever and wherever you might have been, you should know that God is watching you. In poetic form it is expressed in antonymic contrast: τὴν εἰσοδὸν ...καὶ τὴν ἔξοδόν. Another example is Deut 28:6, where the context is almost like the former example. Again, wishing the blessing of God for the whole of life is stated with the help of antonyms: Ἐν τῷ εἰσπορεύεσθαι... ἐν τῷ ἐκπορεύεσθαι. Also look at Deut 28:6.<sup>25</sup>

In the New Testament there is the same expression, but Jesus also pronounces: ὅτι οἶδα πόθεν ἦλθον καὶ ποῦ ὑπάγω (Jn 8:14). In this phrase Jesus is talking about Himself. This parallel confirms not only the idea of totality. Its double occurrence may also shed light on the

meaning of the dialogue in 3:1-10. That, which is common in both (3:8 and 8:14-15) usages, is the following: Jesus underlines that the Pharisees were fleshly (“κατὰ τὴν σάρκα κρίνετε” verse 15), the author of the Gospel notes that they did not understand Him (8:27), in 8:23 the theme of “ἐκ τῶν κάτω” and “ἐκ τῶν ἄνω” appears. By widening the borders of the chosen segment of 3:1-10 till verse 21, it will be possible to draw even more parallels. Even at that point the vocabulary of Jesus is very similar in both passages. The parallels mentioned above confirm the presence of two spheres of existence, which are not in a total opposition (there is a connection between them – the figure of Jesus) but complementary in nature. The divine sphere in verse eight is stated as a sovereign and other in nature: strict opposition of “flesh” and “spirit” in verse six shares its influence in verse eight.

At this point Ridderbos asserts, “In all this the divine possibilities are set over against the impossibilities of humankind (“flesh”)... to cause people to look away from their own (im)possibilities and toward God for their salvation” (Ridderbos, 1997:129). In such a view it is hard not to notice the traditional approach of interpretation of this passage when every verse is seen as another brick in the Soteriological wall of the Gospel of John. Yet it seems too simplistic – the notion of God as the only saving power was always present in Judaism. In this segment there is no evidence of the opposition of the spheres. However, presence of the opposite terms in the text might rather testify their otherness.

Another parallel from this verse could be drawn with verse two where Nicodemus provides the basis for his conviction of Jesus’ status. The foundation of Nicodemus’ statement was in observance of miracles which were worked by Jesus. The idea of the parallel is that miracles were just τὰ σημεῖα (it is this word that the author of Jn uses here for “signs”), i.e. “the voice” (τὴν φωνήν) of the spirit in verse eight. In other words, they were the signs of the divine sphere but were not the divine sphere itself. The premise of Nicodemus (and supposedly others represented by him) lied in this miscomprehension of the cause and effect.

Schnackenburg observes:

The great Gnostic question is raised as to the whence and whither of human existence. Its briefest and most trenchant expression was found hitherto in the “Excerpts from Theodotus” given by Clement of Alexandria: “Knowledge of who we were, what we became; where we were, whither we were cast; whither we go, wherefrom we are freed; what (is) birth, what re-birth” (Clement of Alexandria, *Exc. ex Theod.*, 78, 2). The same question occurs in the *Gospel of Truth*: “He who has learned this, knows whence he is come and whither he goes” (22:13ff.).

<sup>25</sup> It is interesting that the same couple “πόθεν... ποῦ...” in the interrogative sentence denotes a slightly different idea. Thus in Gen 16:8 and Judges 19:17 this pair expresses the question “Who are you” by asking to tell about ones origin and the goal which led the one before meeting with other people.

The above mentioned questions provide further insight into Jn 3:1-10. Here Jesus discusses with Nicodemus not Gnostic question of Salvation through knowledge of a doctrine or through the analysis of the effects of the divine sphere (“what comes from God”) but the possibility of knowledge of the divine sphere itself. Jesus deepens this question  $\Upsilon$  before one might get to the knowledge this person should be “born from above” and thus become a partaker of the divine sphere nature.

### 3.4. Verses nine and ten: Jesus’ irony, the end of the dialogue part

<9> ἀπεκρίθη Νικόδημος καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Πῶς δύναται ταῦτα γενέσθαι;

<10> ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Σὺ εἶ ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ καὶ ταῦτα οὐ γινώσκεις;

The question of Nicodemus is the first real question (not a rhetorical one as in verse four) that required a concrete answer from Jesus. It is only at this question when Jesus starts really explaining Nicodemus’ πῶς, i.e. how ταῦτα are possible.

Interpreting the last question of Nicodemus, Dodd recalls the Prologue and observes, “the expression of 3:5, 6, 8, ἐκ πνεύματος γεννᾶσθαι, echoes the expression ἐκ θεοῦ γεννᾶσθαι, which is found in 1:13” (Dodd, 1965:305). In fact, there is no need in such a far located parallel. Nicodemus’ first statement provides it: ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐλήλυθας (3:2). This is another support to the thesis that hermeneutical key of the dialogue is in Nicodemus’ first address to Jesus.

The question of Nicodimus is usually interpreted as a sign of ignorance. Does Nicodemus mean under generalizing ταῦτα (a) the last stanza of Jesus’ phrase in verse eight about the characteristic of the one who is “born,” or (b) his concern about the concept of “birth” in verses three and five? Both variants are probable. If the implicit question of Nicodemus between verses six and seven is taken into account, then option (b) is more probable. On the one hand, Nicodemus already had a chance to express his skeptic attitude to a kind of “another” birth. On the other hand, the second statement of Jesus seems to elaborate His phrase in verse three and it is natural to suppose that Nicodemus decided to express his doubts again.

However, the question of Nicodemus might be interpreted as a mere desire to move the conversation to more a concrete plane. According to the present interpretation of the verses 2-8 nothing practical (which would answer the question “how”) was said. Jesus stated only abstract principals about the possibility to know the divine sphere. Beginning with verse 11 He moves to the more specific things of the Soteriological plane. In verse 11 Jesus talks about judgment of God and God’s love toward the humanity and the whole world. In verse 11 Jesus makes a parallel with the time of Moses and the tragic event in the wilderness to depict the similarity and the difference of this judgment. In verse 11 Jesus begins to radically change His vocabulary and use the most

important in the whole Gospel Ī to believe. The notion of knowledge does not appear in the monologue part of the discourse.

Returning to verses nine and ten, it could be seen that Jesus again picks up Nicodemus' words in verse nine and uses them in His own premise, which points to verse three. Compare the following phrases:

Nicodemus (v. 9)	Πὼς δύναται ταῦτα
Jesus (v. 10)	

So, it is possible to assume that Jesus, from the beginning of the dialogue, led Nicodemus to accept His premise with respect to the divine sphere, and tried to reject Nicodemus' convictions, implicitly conveyed in verse two:

Nicodemus (v. 2)	οἶδαμεν .	
Jesus (v. 3)		οὐ δύναται ιδεῖν
Nicodemus (v. 9)		πὼς δύναται ταῦτα
Jesus (v. 10)		οὐ γινώσκεις ;

Jesus' phraseology in this example fits well to the sense of Nicodemus' first premise about what or who can "from God to be sent." His answer in verse ten confirms the matter of the dialogue part: possibility to know the divine sphere.

Here it is possible to see the use of two verbs: οἶδα and γινώσκειν. It seems that in this passage these verbs could be taken as synonyms. Richard Erickson, who investigated several cases of their appearance in Paul's writings, concludes "that for certain contexts these two verbs are indeed used synonymously" (Erickson, 1982:121-22). Synonymous usage of these two verbs in John's passage is very probable as well. Thus it is possible to see the parallel of verse ten to verse two. If in the former Nicodemus stated the possession of knowledge of the divine sphere, then in the latter Jesus leads Nicodemus to the point of recognition: such knowledge is accessible only through an action from God. What is this "birth from above" compared with? It is not clear in this segment. However, if the borders of the passage are widened, then it is possible to see that the Soteriological and Christological planes begin in verse 11.

Verse	Formal plane	Semantic plane
9	Πὼς δύναται ταῦτα γενέσθαι;	Acknowledgement of disability to understand Jesus' idea

<b>10</b>	Σὺ εἶ ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ καὶ ταῦτα οὐ γινώσκεις;	Irony, bringing back Nicodemus' premise in verse two
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Thus, the dialogue part of the conversation concludes in verse ten. As it was noted above, Nicodemus disappears from the formal plane Ἴ there are no words of him in the rest of the chapter three. At the same time there are implicit marks, which allow the reader to assume that Jesus' words relate to the previously stated ideas in verses 1-10.

### 3.5. Summary

1. The words of Nicodemus in verse two represent not only the attitude of Nicodemus (and represented by him Pharisaic circles of Judea) but also the hidden premise which becomes the starting point of the whole conversation. In the compliment to Jesus Nicodemus states that he (the Pharisees) is able to determine the “mechanism” of the divine sphere according to the manifestation of the sphere (“we know...”). It is against this premise Jesus starts developing His thesis.
2. The third verse is the first statement of Jesus' thesis. Unlike the traditional approach to the interpretation, which recognizes the logical break between verse two and verse three, the researcher sees the succession of the main concepts. This “coherence” of the conversation follows from the succession of the main terms, which can be illustrated with the table:

Verse	Lexical transformation of the main idea
<b>2</b>	ἀπὸ θεοῦ (ἐλήλυθας)
<b>3</b>	γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν
<b>4</b>	(γεννηθῆ) δεύτερον
<b>5</b>	γεννηθῆ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος
<b>6</b>	τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος
<b>7</b>	γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν
<b>8</b>	ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος

3. As follows from the previous table, the whole dialogue contains the reference to the divine sphere. This is confirmed by the analysis of the images which have been used worldwide to denote the realms of divine dwelling. In this segment the divine sphere is expressed by the traditional Jewish literary device that used contraposition of antonym pairs to denote the idea of either “wholeness,” “totality” or “otherness.” The fact that this literary device could be found almost in every book of the Hebrew Bible confirms the commonness of such a way to talk about otherness of the divine and human (see Appendix I where the analysis of the Hebrew Bible

passages is provided). Usage of this device suggests that Jesus also denotes not the point of salvation but the difference between God's sphere and human realm.

4. The constant contraposition of the divine sphere (“ἄνωθεν,” “πνεύματος”) to the sphere of humans (“(γεννηθῆ) δεύτερον,” “σάρξ”) and the lack of concrete terms and specific references to the practical plane lead to the conclusion that Epistemological plane is the most probable one for the coherent interpretation of the dialogue part of the conversation. Only from verse 11 it is possible to talk about Soteriological and Christological weight of the conversation.
5. The metaphor “to be born” denotes the initiative of the divine sphere (God). Without this initiative any knowledge of the divine sphere and consequently salvation is impossible. In that respect the passage Jn 3:1-10 serves as a foundation to the Soteriological development in vv. 11-21.
6. Literary analysis allows suggesting the following interpretation of the semantic plane of the conversation (the structure of the dialogue part is in Appendix II):

Verse	Formal plane	Semantic plane
2	οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐλήλυθας	We are able to determine what could be from God and what could not.
3	ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν, οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ	The first statement of the thesis. Requirement of an action on behalf of the divine sphere for getting ability to get notion of this sphere.
4	μὴ δύναται εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ δεύτερον εἰσελθεῖν καὶ γεννηθῆναι  πὼς δύναται... γεννηθῆναι μὴ δύναται... γεννηθῆναι	Misunderstanding of qualitative character of the action as the quantitative one.  What are you talking about?
5	ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος οὐ δύναται εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ	The second statement of the thesis. To belong to the divine sphere one should experience an action on behalf of that sphere, i.e. initiative of God.
6	τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τῆς σαρκὸς σὰρξ ἐστίν, καὶ τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος πνεῦμά ἐστίν.	There is ontological difference between the sphere of human and the divine sphere
7	Δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν.	The third statement of the thesis.
8	τὸ πνεῦμα ὅπου θέλει πνεῖ καὶ τὴν φωνὴν αὐτοῦ ἀκούεις, ἀλλ' οὐκ οἶδας πόθεν ἔρχεται καὶ ποῦ ὑπάγει· οὕτως ἐστὶν πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος	Unborn is able to observe the effect and knows nothing about the cause, i.e. about the divine sphere, of τὸ πνεῦμα.
9	Πὼς δύναται ταῦτα γενέσθαι;	Acknowledgement of disability to understand Jesus' idea
10	Σὺ εἶ ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ	Irony, bringing back Nicodemus'



	καὶ ταῦτα οὐ γινώσκεις;	premise in verse two
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7. The further going verse 12, which defines everything formerly stated as “belonging to the notion/sphere of earthly”) may denote the following. Jesus explains that it is not possible to become a partaker of the divine sphere only on the basis of the human ability to recognize the existence of this sphere according to the analysis of its effects. In other words, the “earthly” in verse 12 associates with what is human attitude toward earthly manifestations of the divine sphere. The “heavenly,” that is not yet discussed, relates to the attitude of the divine sphere (i.e. God) towards the human. Therefore, if the latter dialogue part (3:1-10) lightened inability of humans to comprehend the divine realm by the analysis of its earthly effects, the former, i.e. monologue part of the conversation (3:11-21) reveals the nature of Gods’ attitude toward the whole world.

## **Conclusion**

The goal of this research was in resolving the problems of the traditional approach to interpretation of the passage Jn 3:1-10.

For achievement of this goal the following tasks have been made. First, the review of the scholars who interpret of the chosen passage has shown that a Soteriological and a Christological approaches, which were developed during the first centuries of Christianity, remained the main approaches to interpretation until now. The following weak points of this approach were marked: the break in logic and coherence of the dialogue is taken for granted; the parallels that are called to clarify vague expressions in the segment are found in dubious passages of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. As Cottrell correctly warns against ‘parallelomania,’ “it is right, in short, if there is a good probability that the alleged parallel was actually part of the presupposition pool shared by the writer and his intended readers (not merely ideas current either later, or elsewhere, or in a different social or conceptual milieu)” (Cottrell, 1989:101). That tendency reveals that the passage is read more in dogmatic plane rather than in the textual borders.

The review of the main themes of John’s theology was called to explain such a situation. The review has shown that the whole Gospel, according to its author idea, is subordinate to two main theological themes: Soteriology and Christology. Those two themes determine the theology of every part of the Gospel. Meanwhile, the presence of the other theological themes allows assuming that some segments of the Gospel are ruled not only by Soteriology and Christology. According to the accurate note of Culpepper: “The plot of the gospel is propelled by conflict between belief and unbelief as responses to Jesus. The centrality of this conflict is confirmed by the fact that almost half of the occurrences of the verb “believe” in NT are found in John (98 out of 239)” (Culpepper, 1983:97). One of such segments is Jn 3:1-10.

As an alternative to the traditional interpretation of this passage (i.e. Soteriologically and Christologically) the researcher proposed an additional Ī Epistemological Ī aspect that is hidden in the introductory words of Nicodemus (verse two).

According to the researcher’s opinion, Nicodemus expressed not only the attitude of the ruling circles of Israel, which were represented by his figure, to Jesus but also revealed their theological position in respect to the possibility to understand the divine sphere. Emphatic “οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐλήλυθας” tells about confidence of Nicodemus in possession of trustworthy criteria, which allows him to judge what might be from God and, hence, what might not be from God. This epistemological premise of Nicodemus is the starting point for the whole conversation in Jn 3:1-21.

This is confirmed by the fact that along the whole length of the segment there is constant contraposition of two different spheres – the sphere of humans and the divine sphere.

Such a contraposition is expressed in pairs of antonyms, which were traditionally used in the Hebrew Bible either to convey the idea of the wholeness, totality or to denote “otherness” of the divine sphere in comparison with the human realm. The idea that God is not like a human being is very common not only for Jewish mindset but also for other nations. And the means for denoting the divine sphere reflects similarities in the notion of otherness between God and person, between heavens and earth.

Analysis of the usage of those pairs has shown that there is a definite succession between the usage of the “spirit” – “flesh” pair in Jn and in the Hebrew Bible. In the chosen segment contraposition of “spirit” and “flesh” serves as a parallel to the contraposition of Jesus’ thesis to Nicodemus’ premise. The transcendence of the divine sphere in 3:1-10 is expressed in such terms as ἀπὸ θεοῦ (ἐλήλυθας), ἄνωθεν, ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος.

The only but important difference of this concept from the passages in the Hebrew Bible is that Jesus in His thesis provides a solution to the transcendence. He states a condition that makes the divine sphere available for the human. This condition is expressed by a metaphor “to be born” that underlines the fact that the alienation of human from God might be overcome. And the initiative is in God’s hands.

Such “initiative” from the divine sphere, according to Jesus’ thesis, is necessary for any human in order to get ability to know the essence of the divine sphere. Ontological difference (v. 6) makes it impossible for human (“flesh”) to know the divine sphere (“spirit”). This results in the fact that manifestations of the divine sphere (effect) are falsely taken by human for the divine sphere itself (cause). In other words, the premise of Nicodemus was grounded into the corrupt acceptance: the effect is taken as the cause. Just verification of the divine sphere manifestation does not allow human neither to correctly value this sphere, nor to enter it.

This leads to recognition that the passage Jn 3:1-10 is not a narration that deals with Soteriological or Christological aspects, but reveals the conflict of Epistemological presuppositions.

Therefore, this passage underlines the following qualities of the divine sphere. First, the divine sphere is absolutely different from the earthly. Second, the divine sphere is nevertheless available for humans and, hence, not purely transcendent. Third, this sphere is not comprehensible with the natural means of analysis, which are able to verify not the divine sphere itself but rather its manifestations.

## Appendix I. Categories of antonym pairs

Antonymous pairs were often used in the Hebrew Bible. Jesus used such pairs too as a traditional way of expressing wholeness. To prove the traditional character of this literary means it would be helpful to present the examination such pairs from the Hebrew Bible. It is helpful to divide them into several categories.

The first category contains the pairs which are made of verbs and nouns, and represent actions. The second one is the pairs of antonyms which express directions and spatial meanings. In the third category we assembled expressions which consist of qualitative pairs of antonyms, and are represented by adjectives. The pairs which denote kindred relations compose the fourth category. The fifth one arranged opposition couples which could be united under seasons of the year or parts of an astronomical day. The last category represents examples which contain the nouns denoting cosmic spatial objects.

These oppositional pairs are called to express the wholeness of an object or a subject. The context of each pair testifies that.

Different quantities of examples are found for each category throughout the Hebrew Bible. Diapason of the used means, which are utilized by the authors of the Hebrew Bible books for conveying the wholeness and otherness idea, is quite wide. Nevertheless, some pairs of antonyms are more preferred and commonly used.

### **Contrasting pairs of action:**

a) "To increase" and "to decrease." This couple, for example, is used in Deut 4:2, where it is the question of the importance of God's commandments: "Ὁὐ προσθήσετε πρὸς τὸ ῥῆμα... καὶ οὐκ ἀφεκέιτε." The antonymic couple is used to underline at least two ideas. First, it conveys the idea about completeness of the Law. Second, the couple of action expresses this idea: "do not do anything," i.e. timeless relevance of the Lord's commands. In order to strengthen imperative of denial, the author resorts to a poetic means of the contrasting pairs, or opposite couples.

b) "To get in" Ἰ "to get out." These two notions are represented, for example, in Psalms (120:8). It is the blessing of a psalmist who testifies that God is steadfast. The author wants to say: whenever and wherever you might have been, you should know that God is watching you. In poetic form it is expressed in antonymic contrast: τὴν εἰσοδὸν ...καὶ τὴν ἔξοδόν. Another example is Deut 28:6, where context is almost like in the former example. Again, wishing blessing of God for the whole of life is stated with the help of antonyms: Ἐν τῷ εἰσπορεύεσθαι... ἐν τῷ ἐκπορεύεσθαι. Also look at Deut 28:6.

c) “To be calm” – “to be active.” An example from Book of Psalms (138:2 - Σὺ ἔγνωσ τὴν καθέδραν μου καὶ τὴν ἔγερσίν μου) again is called to express just one idea: God knows everything. Again, instead of “everything,” the author uses a more appealing poetic metaphor.

d) “To ascend” – “to descend.” This pair of verbs is used in a very specific context. For example, Ps 138:8 Ἰ “ἐὰν ἀναβῶ εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν, ...ἐὰν καταβῶ εἰς τὸν ἄδην.” It denotes not only the distance which divides people from God, who is somewhere “beyond” the human sphere. It denotes complete remoteness of God. The notion of “wholeness” is poetically stated: God is omnipresent.

e) “To open” – “to close.” This image of power is found in the Masoretic version of Is 22:22: “...when he opens no one will shut.” It was said about a person who had received the rights to do anything and command anyone. It is interesting that in Septuagint this poetic expression of the idea is stated more directly: “καὶ δώσω τὴν δόξαν Δαυιδ αὐτῷ, καὶ ἄρξει, καὶ οὐκ ἔσται ὁ ἀντικέγων” – “and there will be no one who says against.” Thus we see textual conformation to our understanding of the opposite couples usage.

f) “To give” – “to take away.” One of the most provoking books of the Hebrew Bible is the Book of Job. One of the most well known sayings from that book is “ὁ κύριος ἔδωκεν, ὁ κύριος ἀφείκατο” (Job 1:21). Usually the main emphasis is put on Job’s humility. On the other hand, it should be noted that, in his speech, Job uses the mentioned poetic device to express a powerful idea: recognition of God’s sovereignty and absolute power over everything.

This pair is the last in the first category of opposite pairs of action. The next category represents another lexical modification of antonymous couples – dimensional or spatial category.

### **Spatial contrasting pairs:**

a) “Right” – “left.” “Δεξιὰ οὐδὲ ἀριστερὰ” in Deut. 2:27 is one of many examples where this pair of antonyms is used with the purpose to convey the idea of wholeness. In context the author says: I will not turn *anywhere*. Other examples are: 2 Sam 2:19; 14:19;

b) “East” – “west.” Sometimes in this couple the nouns are changed into even more poetic expressions: “the dawn of the sun” (Ps 49:1, 4). The whole idea of these nouns is not in their belonging to the cosmic sphere. Irrespectively to their common meaning these nouns convey the idea of “all” or “nothing”, depending on their context. Also reference: Is 43:5, 6 (here we see not only “east”-“west” but also another antonymic pair: “north”-“south”); 45:6, 7; 59:19; Mal 1:11; Ps 88:12-13; 112:3, Zech 8:7.

c) “Forward” – “backward”: Zech 7:14; 9:8. In each case the person promises to go nowhere. Again, such a totality is conveyed by opposite pairs.

d) “Dan” – “Beersheba.” ἀπὸ Δαν καὶ ...Βηρσαβεε (e.g. 2 Sam 17:11) expresses the idea of totality in respect to the land borders. Being situated on the opposite sides of the country, those two cities, Dan and Beersheba, were used in historical books of the Hebrew Bible to describe whole territory of the kingdom (see also: Judges 20:1; 1 Sam. 3:20; 2 Sam 3:10; 24:2, 15; 1 Kings 4:25; Amos 8:14).

e) “Above” – “down.” Amos 2:9 tells us of a promise of God. However, God was obviously interested not only in what is “above” or “below.” God is interesting in “everything.” It is clear that the promise of total distraction is stated. Again, this confirms the rule I in order to express the idea of totality it is enough to pick up two opposite parts which belong to the described sphere or notion.

f) “Beginning” – “end.” Τὰ ἔσχατα καὶ τὰ ἀρχαῖα (Ps 138:5) is an interesting example of how Jewish literature tradition expressed very abstract notion of time and dimension. It is very representing and involving: everything fits to those borders of time.

### **Category of qualitative pairs:**

Qualitative pairs are understood to be couples of antonyms which juxtapose qualities of objects.

a) “Big” – “small.” The pair μέγα ἢ μικρὸν is widely used in Hebrew Bible books. Usually they are combined around ‘speech’ context and are used to show promise of a speaker not to tell anything. See: 1 Sam 20:2; 22:15; 25:36; 30:19;

b) “Life” – “death.” ...θάνατον καὶ ...ζωήν - those are peculiar words which sometimes denote not just the end of somebody’s life and life itself. The whole existence is at stake here. In 2 Sam 15:21 those two terms are located as copula and form poetic expression of totality: Ephai swears to the king that he will always and everywhere be with him. First, he expresses this idea plainly and then, in order to clarify the borders of “wherever,” he points to life and death.

### **Pairs which use the language of kinship relations:**

Pairs of this category are usually used in historical books in scenes where the population of a nation is to be illuminated. To involve reader’s emotions and dramatize narration, authors of those books point to kinship pairs.

a) “Husband” – “wife.” (ἄνδρα καὶ γυναῖκα 1 Sam 27:9);

b) “Son” – “daughter.” (υἱὸν καὶ θυγατέραν 1 Sam 30:19);

### **Cosmological opposition pairs:**

This category is the most widely used. Such frequency is understandable and explainable after studying the contexts of those pairs of antonyms.

a) “Day” – “night.” ἡμέρα καὶ νύξ (Deut 28:66; Ps 1:2; 31:4; 73:16; 90:5-6; Is 34:10 – the idea of totality is confirmed right away). Another couple that could be included under this heading is the pair of “light” and “darkness.” In Is 45:7 we see that God is underlining the point that everything is made by Him.

b) “Sun” – “moon.” ἡμέρας ὁ ἥλιος οὐ συγκαύσει σε οὐδὲ ἡ σελήνη τὴν νύκτα (Ps 120:6; Is 24:23; Joel 2:10 is a doubled couple.

c) “Earth” – “heaven.” Οὐρανός καὶ γῆς. This couple of antonyms is the most common one in the Hebrew Bible. Such a frequency is explainable. One of the widely discussed themes is the theological one. In other words, every book in the Hebrew Bible canon is connected with the person of God and His attributes. Questions like what is God’s will, God’s character and spheres of His dwelling are raised in different forms. In order to answer those questions and make the figure of God as close to man as possible, the authors use different means. One of those means is description of the divine sphere in terms of opposition couples of antonyms.

Sometimes those couples are not complete and the essence of the message is revealed in supposed opposition of the divine sphere to the profane one. For example, the Most High displays His might in thunder and in wind (see 1 Kings 19:11; Ps 106:25). After the Flood, God “signs” with a rainbow His covenant with Noah not to destroy the earth again. The text shows transcendence of God in interesting opposition pairs: “I set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth” (Gen 9:13) and parallel: “This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that is on the earth” (9:17). The profane sphere is identified by the term “earth” and “flesh.”

Other opposite pairs of the Hebrew Bible with brief commentaries are provided here for reference.

Deut 3:24 – “...for what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as Your?” This rhetorical question presupposes only one answer: nobody, because the pair of antonyms includes the whole world. The same idea with the same means is expressed in Deut 4:3, where the author confirms this interpretation with the clear statement: “there is no other.”

If we look to Deut 28:23 we see how this device is used in relation to disobedience to God’s law: “And the heaven which is over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you, iron.” In order to express the condition when any prayer loses its “wings” and power, the author “immures” such a person into jail, where everything (“heaven” and “earth”) becomes impenetrably deaf.

Deut 30:19 – “I call heaven and earth to witness against you...,” says God and includes as witnesses everything! (See also the theme of court speeches in Deut 31:28; 32:1; Is 1:2; Ps 49:1, 4).

Is 13:13 – “...I shall make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken...” In comparison to v. 14 it becomes clear that the author uses “heaven” and “earth” in order to underline the universe, including everything and everyone in the cataclysm. The same idea is in Is 24:18; 51:6. Jeremiah also expresses consequences of fierce anger of God in terms of antonyms: “...the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above be dark” (Jer 4:28). Also Joel twice predicts awful time using opposition of “earth” and “heaven” couple (Joel 2:10; 3:16). Haggai forwards the words of God about terrible days for Zerubbabel in antonymous opposition of “heaven” and “earth” (Hag 2:6, 21). In the Book of Amos God promises to find those He looks for everywhere: “Though they dig into Sheol... and though they ascend to heaven” (9:2).

Is 65:17 – “...I create new heavens and a new earth,” says God and means “everything” (cf. Rev 21:1 with clarification in verse five – “Behold, I am making all thing new”). Almost the same idea is conveyed in Psalms: “the heavens are Yours, the earth also is Yours” with obvious interpretation of this poetic form: God has created and thus has “the world and all it contains” (Ps 88:12). Zachariah also reflects the fact that God has created everything in a similar way (Zech. 12:1). The author of Deuteronomy confesses that everything is God’s property: “heaven and the highest heavens, the earth and all that is in it” (10:14).

In the Book of Psalms God is exalted “above the heavens” by attributing to Him the glory which is “above all the earth” (Ps 56:6, 12). This particular case is noteworthy because the author not only contrasts “heavens” and “earth,” but also situates them in parallel lines. In Ps 72:25, the psalmist exclaims that there is not a one like God which he “has ...in heaven ...desire ...on earth,” i.e. nowhere. The fact that God is unspeakably high and mighty, and that everything glorifies Him, is confirmed by the psalmist in parallelism: “how majestic is Your name in all the earth, who has displayed Your splendor above the heavens” (Ps 8:2). The same poetic device is used for description of God’s glory in Hab 3:3.

Thus, the wide usage of antonym pairs as a literary device with denotation of the notion of “totality,” “wholeness” is revealed in the Hebrew Bible.



## Appendix II. Three stages of the development of the dialogue part

<1> Ἦν δὲ ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων, Νικόδημος ὄνομα αὐτῷ, ἀρχων τῶν Ἰουδαίων·

<2> οὗτος ἦλθεν πρὸς αὐτὸν νυκτὸς καὶ  
εἶπεν αὐτῷ,

Ῥαββί,

οἶδαμεν ὅτι

ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐλήλυθας

διδάσκαλος·

οὐδεὶς γὰρ δύναται ταῦτα τὰ σημεῖα ποιεῖν ἃ σὺ ποιεῖς,  
ἐὰν μὴ ᾖ ὁ θεὸς μετ' αὐτοῦ.

<3>

ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ,  
Ἄμην ἄμην λέγω σοι,

ἐὰν μὴ

τις

γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν,

οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν

τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ.

<4>

λέγει πρὸς αὐτὸν [ὁ] Νικόδημος,

Πῶς δύναται

ἄνθρωπος

γεννηθῆναι γέροντων;

μὴ δύναται

εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ

δεύτερον

εἰσελθεῖν καὶ

γεννηθῆναι;

<5>

ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς,

Ἄμην ἄμην λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μὴ

τις γεννηθῆ

ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος,

οὐ δύναται

εἰσελθεῖν

εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ.

<6>

τὸ γεγεννημένον

ἐκ τῆς σαρκὸς

σὰρξ ἐστίν,

καὶ τὸ γεγεννημένον \_\_\_\_\_ ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος

πνεύμα ἐστίν.

<7>

μὴ θαυμάσης ὅτι εἶπόν σοι,

Δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν.

<8>

τὸ πνεῦμα ὅπου θέλει πνεῖ

καὶ τὴν φωνὴν αὐτοῦ ἀκούεις,

ἀλλ' οὐκ οἶδας

πόθεν ἔρχεται καὶ

πού ὑπάγει·

οὕτως ἐστίν

πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος \_\_\_\_\_ ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος.

<9> ἀπεκρίθη Νικόδημος καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ,

Πῶς δύναται ταῦτα γενέσθαι;

<10> ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ,

Σὺ εἶ ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ καὶ ταῦτα

οὐ γινώσκεις;

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