

John 3:16–18

John 2:23 While he was in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, many began to believe in his name when they saw the signs he was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus would not trust himself to them because he knew them all, ²⁵ and did not need anyone to testify about human nature. He himself understood it well.

¹ Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you are doing unless God is with him.” ³ Jesus answered and said to him, “Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can a person once grown old be born again? Surely he cannot reenter his mother’s womb and be born again, can he?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I told you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wills, and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹ Nicodemus answered and said to him, “How can this happen?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, “You are the teacher of Israel and you do not understand this? ¹¹ Amen, amen, I say to you, we speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² If I tell you about earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

¹⁹ And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.

Context

John 3:1-21 comprises a single, cohesive scene within the Johannine narrative and should be studied as a single pericope – but here on Trinity Sunday, we glance at a small portion that forms a capstone like statement of the role of Jesus in our salvation.

The fuller story begins at the end of John 2 where we encounter the gospel writer’s closing statement (vv. 23-25). What seems clear is that a lot more than the temple cleansing took place during Jesus’ visit to Jerusalem for this first Passover festival. There is the one recorded sign at Cana; otherwise the record is silent. Yet, the evangelist, while recording no details, goes on to write “*many began to believe in his name when they saw the signs he was doing.*” Even though many began to believe in Jesus, “*Jesus would not trust himself to them.*”

These verses suggest that Jesus did not yet see a clear basis for an enduring relationship of faith with the people. They were enthralled by the signs, but Jesus knows they will always want one more – there will always be one more thing in the way of commitment. Only later does Jesus express the bases of that lasting, committed relationship: “*You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no*

longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father” (John 15:14–15).

Jesus well understands human nature (2:25) – and that is perhaps the overriding narrative of this section of the Fourth Gospel: the response of human nature in coming face-to-face with the Messiah. The majority of John 3 describes Jesus’ encounter with the Jewish leader Nicodemus – a prestigious man “in the know.”

One way these verses are connected is the double “*we know*,” uttered by Nicodemus in 3:2 and by Jesus in v. 11. The first person plural, “we,” indicates that both are representing groups – perhaps the distinction between Jewish and Christian leaders, perhaps the subtle difference between thinking that Jesus is just a “*teacher who has come from God*” or that Jesus is the one who has “*descended from heaven*,” who will be “*lifted up*,” and through believing him one has eternal life – the difference between Jesus as a human teacher or the divine savior.

Commentary

In John 3:1-21, the focus shifts from the interaction of the many with Jesus to Jesus’ interaction with an single individual, Nicodemus. What follows seems to naturally divide into two parts: vv. 1-10, the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus; and vv. 11-21, a discourse by Jesus. This text is the first instance of a common Johannine pattern of a central event, in this case a dialogue, followed by a discourse that draws general theological themes out of the particular event.

The Dialogue with Nicodemus

The opening verses (vv.1-2a) present both positive and negative images of Nicodemus. On the positive side, Nicodemus, a Jewish leader (v. 1), seeks out Jesus. To seek Jesus, as noted earlier (1:38), is one of the first acts of discipleship in John. On the negative side, however, Nicodemus hides his seeking under the cloak of night (cf. the night visit of King Zedekiah and Jeremiah, Jer 37:16-21). This reference to the time of Nicodemus’s visit is neither an incidental detail nor an attempt at historical reporting. Rather, it provides a clue to the significance of this story for the Fourth Evangelist. “Night” (*nyktos*) is used metaphorically in the Fourth Gospel to represent separation from the presence of God (9:4; 11:10; 13:30). The symbolic significance of this night visit is confirmed by 3:19-21, which condemns those who prefer darkness to light.

The dialogue is initiated by Nicodemus’s pronouncement about Jesus’ identity in v.2b, but Jesus’ response in v. 3 shifts the initiative away from Nicodemus. As the dialogue unfolds, Nicodemus’s speech is reduced to questions (vv.4, 9), while Jesus’ speeches become progressively longer, leading finally to the discourse that begins in v.11.

Nicodemus’s opening words to Jesus in v.2b contain three positive acknowledgments of Jesus’ Identity.

- First, Nicodemus calls Jesus “*Rabbi*,” an address that acknowledges Jesus as a teacher (cf. 1:38, 49).
- Second, Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus is a “*teacher who has come from God*.” Although “from God” is a traditional way of speaking of religious figures as God’s emissaries (e.g., John the Baptist in 1:6), that Jesus’ origin is from God is also a crucial Christological affirmation in the Fourth Gospel (e.g., 1:1, 18; 3:31; 6:38; 7:28-29). Nicodemus’s words here are like Caiaphas’s words in 11:50: the full truth is unwittingly told.
- Third, Nicodemus speaks to Jesus in the first-person plural (“we know”). Nicodemus does not speak to Jesus simply as an individual, but as a leader of his community, who at this point has a positive view of Jesus.

Nicodemus's words are not unambiguously positive, however, because his insights into Jesus are based on Jesus' signs (v.2b). From 2:23-25, the reader knows that Jesus will not entrust himself to those whose faith is based on signs. Nicodemus's confident assertion of who Jesus is ("we know") is thus immediately called into question by the warrants he offers for that knowledge: Jesus' signs. Moreover, Nicodemus assumes that he can explain what Jesus does through his preconceived categories of the possible ("no one can do these signs" v.2). This certitude about what is and is not possible with God will be challenged as the dialogue with Jesus unfolds.

What unfolds is a leader of the Jews has come to Jesus – albeit timidly – to begin a dialogue. But this is Jesus who understood human nature and so he does not respond directly to Nicodemus's acknowledgment of him. Instead, he challenges Nicodemus with a teaching – one that directly challenges Nicodemus' world view "You want to see heaven? You think you 'know' what is necessary? Hardly, you must be born *anōthen* (more on that later). Each of Jesus' teachings in John 3:1-11 begins with the introductory formula "*Amen, amen*" (here in v. 3, later in vv.5, 11). Jesus' teaching here combines the traditional image of the kingdom of God with a new metaphor, "to be born *anōthen*".

Born anōthen

The expression *gennēthē anōthen* can be translated as "born again" or "born from above." Some bibles opt for the "again" (TLW), some opt for "again" with a footnote to explain there is an alternative (RSV, NIV, TEV, NASB, ESV, KJV). Other opt for "from above" without explanation (NAB, NJB) or with explanation as to the alternative (NSRV, CEV).

This double meaning is possible only in Greek; there is no Hebrew or Aramaic word with a similar double meaning. Jesus' words to Nicodemus in v.3 are unavoidably and intentionally ambiguous because of the inherent double meaning of *anōthen*. The ambiguity of meaning is lost in English translations because the translators privilege one meaning of *anōthen* in the text and relegate the second meaning to a footnote at best. This translation strategy communicates to the reader that the footnoted translation is a secondary definition, not an inherent meaning of the word. The translators thus decide for the reader that one reading is primary and the other secondary, when the Fourth Evangelist intends both to be heard simultaneously. Jesus' expression "to be born *anōthen*, to be born from above/again" challenges Nicodemus to move beyond surface meanings to a deeper meaning. When English translations resolve the tension in Jesus' words by reducing *anōthen* to one of its meanings, the challenge to Nicodemus (and to the reader) is lost. The intentional double meaning of *anōthen* must be kept in mind when reading this verse in order to discern Jesus' full meaning and the nature of Nicodemus's misunderstanding.

So - which is the better translation? This is a way of asking what is the answer Jesus intends as he asks the ambiguous question? Let's take a look. As to the word *anōthen*, the prefix *ana* (adverbial form: *ano*) generally means "up". As in *anabaino* = "to go up" in contrast to *katabaino* - "to go down". The adverb *ano* is used three times in John all in reference to something "up".

- 2:7 – They filled the jars with water to the brim (**top**)
- 8:23 – "You belong to what is **below** [*ek ton kato*], I belong to what is **above** [*ek ton ano*], You belong to this world, but I do not belong to this world [*ek tou kosmou*].
- 11:41 – Jesus raised his eyes **up** and said...

The suffix *-then* generally means "(motion) from (a place)". It is used in *pothen* in v. 8. *pou-* = where? + *-then* = from -- "You do not know **from where** the Spirit comes." So, most literally, *anōthen* means "from up". Besides its use in our text (vv. 3 & 7), it always has the sense "from up" in John.

- 3:31 – The one who comes from **above** is above [epano] all. The one who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of earthly things. But the one who comes from heaven is **above** [epano] all.
- 19:11 – You would have no power over me if it were not given to you **from above**.
- 19:23 – The garment was seamless, woven in one piece **from top** to bottom.

In English we have the phrase “from the top” which can mean “start from the beginning” or “do over”. So *anōthen* can mean, “again” or “anew,” but that isn’t its primary meaning.

I think that as other terms are misunderstood in John, Jesus meant “from above” (= from God) and Nicodemus took it as “again” (= a second time). It is striking that the popularization of this expression, “born again” has accepted Nicodemus’ misunderstanding (born again) rather than Jesus’ word.

What about being born? Every reference to *gennao* (“give birth”) in John 3 are passive (vv. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8). A good grammatical question to ask here is “who is the one who gives birth?” Mary gave birth to Jesus – clearly here, Mary is the “actor.” But in v.3 there is no clearly stated actor because the verbs are passively stated. The word *gennao* is used in John 1:12-13 where the “actor” is clearly defined: “*But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man’s decision but of God.*” The “actor” is God.

This quick grammar lesson indicates that being “born from above” is not something we do. It is something done to us (by God). In a similar way, being born the first time was not something we did. Our physical births were caused by powers far beyond our being. Being born is something that happens to us from powers outside of ourselves. We have to take that image seriously – more seriously than many of the so-called “born-again” people. The problem of those who claim to be “born again” is that it often becomes something they do. The etymology, grammar and the imagery of birth indicate that *gennēthē anōthen* is something God (the one “from above”) does to or for us.

Birth as status. Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh write about the importance of birth in *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* [p.82]:

“It is critical to recognize that the topic here is *birth*. Birth status was the single, all-important factor in determining a person's honor rating. Ascribed honor, the honor derived from one's status at birth, was simply a given. It usually stayed with a person for life. ... To be born *over again*, born for a second time (one meaning of *anōthen*), however unthinkable that event might be, would alter one's ascribed honor status in a very fundamental way. A new ascribed honor status would derive from a new birth.

Thus, a second birth, especially if it differed substantially in honor level from the first birth, would be a life-changing event of staggering proportions.

Then they comment specifically about the transformation indicated in our text:

“To be born ‘from above’ -- that is, to be born of the sky, of the realm of God -- is to belong to that realm, to become a veritable child of God. This, of course, is to acquire an honor status of the very highest sort. ... Thus, whatever honor status a person might have in Israelite society, being born “from above” would re-create that person at a whole new level. In addition, since all children of the same father share that father's honor status, differences in status among “the children of God” obviously disappear, except for the firstborn.”

The Dialogue Continues...

Nicodemus is oblivious to the two levels of meaning. He focuses on one meaning of “born *anōthen*” (“again”) and protests that what Jesus calls for is physiologically impossible (3:4). As in v. 2, Nicodemus’s categories of what is possible intrude into the conversation. On the level that Nicodemus

understands Jesus' words, Nicodemus's protest is correct. It is impossible for a grown man to reenter his mother's womb and be born a second time. Nicodemus's protest is ironic, however, because his words are correct and incontestable on one level, but that level stands in conflict and tension with what Jesus intends by the expression "to be born *anōthen*." Jesus' words speak of a radical new birth, generated from above, but Nicodemus's language and imagination do not stretch enough to include that offer.

Born of Water and the Spirit

In vv. 5-8 Jesus provides a fresh set of images to move Nicodemus out of his misunderstanding. The expression "*born of water and Spirit*" (v. 5) interprets the phrase "to be born *anōthen*." For the reader of this Gospel in the Christian community, the reference to water and the Spirit carries with it images of baptism.

Gail O'Day points out that the narrative also includes a listener, Nicodemus, who hears these words independent of any knowledge of Christian baptism. She writes [550]:

Jesus' words about birth from water and Spirit are comprehensible without a baptismal referent if one attends carefully to the verb for "born" (the passive of *gennao*). In 3:4, Nicodemus drew Jesus' attention to the birthing process with his words about his mother's womb. The birth that Nicodemus envisions, the exit from the mother's womb, is quite literally a birth out of water. The breaking of the waters of birth announces the imminent delivery of a child. In v. 5 Jesus plays on Nicodemus's womb imagery to say that entrance into the kingdom of God will require a double birth: physical birth ("water") and spiritual rebirth ("Spirit"). New life will be born from water and Spirit, no longer only from water. Yet the spiritual rebirth also does not void the physical birth. Spirit and flesh are held together; this is not a docetic understanding of human existence before God. Verse 6 supports this interpretation of v. 5, because its terms more directly underscore the two births of v. 5.

Most scholars see this as a secondary meaning at best – but then, most of them are men. Yet, the other scholars note that John is not "newspaper reporting" a conversation, but is in fact providing a narrative to the late 1st century church about meaning.

The early church clearly and indisputably understood baptism to be the sacramental enactment of Jesus' promise of new birth. Thus baptismal reading as the primary meaning of John 3:5-6 expands on the images of birth and new life that O'Day suggests are already contained in the text.

Born from Above as Born of the Spirit

In v. 7, Jesus returns to his initial metaphor, "you must be born *anōthen*." The "you" is a second-person plural pronoun in the Greek, so that Jesus' requirement of fresh birth is now addressed to the "we" of Nicodemus's words in v. 2. Nicodemus resisted Jesus' words about new birth the first time Jesus spoke them (vv. 3-4) and, in v. 7a Jesus warns him against repeating that response.

In v. 8, Jesus uses the image of the wind to explain the birth of which he speaks. The Greek word for "wind" (*pneuma*), like *anōthen*, has two inherent meanings; it means both "wind" and "spirit" (as does the Hebrew word *ruah*). Once again Jesus describes the new birth with a word that cannot be held to a single meaning. The word *pneuma* perfectly captures the essence of Jesus' message: the wind/spirit blows where it wills; human beings can detect its presence but cannot chart its precise movements. Jesus' offer of new birth is like the wind/spirit: a mystery beyond human knowledge and control.

Beyond our Understanding

Nicodemus responds to Jesus' words exactly as Jesus warned him not to, in amazement. Nicodemus's question in v. 9, "*How can this happen?*" Once again his preconceptions of what is possible intrude on

the conversation (cf. 3:2, 4) and prevent him from embracing Jesus' words. One hears in Nicodemus's incredulous question an echo of Sarah's laugh in Gen 18:12. Nicodemus's words of resistance are the last words he speaks in this story, although he will appear twice more in John (7:50–52; 19:39–40).

Jesus responds to Nicodemus's resistance with a quick and penetrating irony that characterizes much of the dialogue in the Fourth Gospel: "*You are the teacher of Israel and you do not understand this?*" (v. 10). In 3:2–4 Nicodemus confidently asserted his knowledge of Jesus and God. Now Jesus turns that confident assertion back on Nicodemus. Neither Nicodemus's credentials (Pharisee, ruler of the Jews, teacher of Israel) nor his self-professed knowledge have brought him closer to understanding Jesus.

The Monologue

At v. 11, the text shifts from a dialogue to a monologue. The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus alternated between Jesus' offer of new birth (vv. 3, 5–8) and Nicodemus's resistance (vv. 4, 9). The shift to the monologue allows Jesus' voice to silence the voice of resistance. Jesus' discourse runs through v. 21 and divides into two parts. Verses 11–15 interpret Jesus' offer of new birth through his death, resurrection, and ascension, and vv. 16–21 focus on the theme of judgment.

We know. Jesus begins the discourse by speaking in the first-person plural. English translations of v. 11 mask the Greek word order. The translation "*we speak of what we know*" flows in English, but the sentence literally reads, "what we know we say" (*oidamen laloumen*). This word order is important because it means that the beginning of Jesus' discourse and Nicodemus's opening words to Jesus (v. 3) are the same: "we know...." It is possible to read Jesus' words as a continuation of the irony of v. 10; Jesus parodies Nicodemus's assertion of his knowledge.

The first-person plural of v. 11 has another function. Jesus' words in v. 11 are all words of witness: we know; we see; we speak; we testify. In its immediate context, Jesus' "*we*" speaks for John the Baptist and the first disciples who have already borne witness to what they have seen. Jesus speaks for all those who have testified to this point in the Gospel narrative. In a broader context, however, Jesus' "*we*" speaks for the witness of the early church. This "*we*" stands in contrast to the "*we*" for whom Nicodemus speaks: the synagogue. The church's witness is contrasted with the non-responsiveness of the synagogue. Nicodemus and his community are representative of all who do not receive the church's witness

Earthly and heavenly things. Jesus uses the expressions "earthly things" and "heavenly things" to summarize the witness that has already been given and the witness still to come (v. 12). "Earthly things" (*ta epigeia*) can be understood as referring to things about human beings, specifically the discussion of new birth in 3:3–8, whereas "heavenly things" (*ta epourania*) refers to things about God and Jesus to which Jesus has privileged access (1:18; 3:13) and that have not yet been revealed to Nicodemus and his community.

Jesus is the source of "heavenly things": "*No one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man.*" This is the second time Jesus has spoken of himself as the "Son of Man" (see also 1:51) and both uses of the term are associated with language of heavenly ascent and descent. The Son of Man's privileged access to God is expressed in spatial terms: The Son of Man moves between heaven and earth and brings the two together. The emphasis in this verse is on Jesus' descent. Jesus knows heavenly things because he has descended; this contrasts Jesus with other figures who were believed to have ascended and through their ascents received heavenly knowledge. For example, Moses went up the mountain and then descended with God's Word. The writings of Philo make clear that some Jews believed that Moses' ascent gave him special status before God. Verse 13 underscores that Jesus first descended, then ascended.

Lifted up to Eternal Life

The significance of the ascension of the Son of Man is elaborated through an OT example (Num 21:8-9). The key to interpreting this analogy between Moses' lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness and the ascension of the Son of Man is the verb (*hypsōō*), meaning both "lift up" and "exalt." (The Hebrew verb *nāsā* has a similar double meaning; see the pun based on this verb in Gen 40:9-23.) Once again the Fourth Evangelist asks the reader to hold two meanings together simultaneously. As the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up on the cross. The double meaning of *hypsōō* implies, however, that the physical act of lifting up is also a moment of exaltation. That is, it is in the crucifixion that Jesus is exalted. John 3:14 is one of three statements about the "lifting up" of the Son of Man in John (see also 8:28; 12:32-34). These three sayings are the Johannine analogue to the three passion predictions in the synoptic Gospels (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34; and parallels).

The overlap of crucifixion and exaltation conveyed by v. 14 is crucial to Johannine understanding of salvation, because the Fourth Evangelist understands Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension as one continuous event. Verse 14 also contains a key to the theological grounding of the Evangelist's attraction to irony; the cross as humiliation is actually exaltation. This will become especially clear in the crucifixion narrative of John 18-19. The Fourth Gospel is often criticized for having an inadequate theology of the cross, but such criticism misconstrues the Johannine treatment of the crucifixion. As v. 14 makes clear, there is no exaltation apart from the crucifixion for John.

The overlap of crucifixion/exaltation also provides the context for interpreting the role of the ascent/descent language in v. 13 (and 1:51) and the Fourth Evangelist's use of the title "Son of Man." The Fourth Evangelist appropriates the traditional apocalyptic figure of the Son of Man (cf. Dan. 7:13) and invests it with his christological perspective. Ascent/descent language thus speaks of Jesus' relationship to God and to the world. The Son of Man's ascent to heaven is salvific, because he is the one who has descended from heaven, the very one whom the Prologue celebrates.

John 3:15 makes explicit the salvific dimension of the crucifixion. Jesus' offer of his life through being lifted up on the cross makes "eternal life" (*zōēn aiōnion*) possible for those who believe. "Eternal life" is one of the dominant metaphors in the Fourth Gospel to describe the change in human existence wrought by faith in Jesus (e.g., 3:36; 4:14; 5:24; 6:27; 17:4). To have eternal life is to live life no longer defined by blood or by the will of the flesh or by human will, but by God (cf. 1:13). "Eternal" does not mean mere endless duration of human existence, but is a way of describing life as lived in the unending presence of God. To have eternal life is to be given life as a child of God. To speak of the newness available to the believer as "eternal life" shifts eschatological expectations to the present. Eternal life is not something held in abeyance until the believer's future, but begins in the believer's present. The focus on the crucifixion in 3:13-15 provides the key to interpreting Jesus' earlier metaphors of new birth and the kingdom of God. The offer of new life, "to be born anew," has only one source—Jesus' offer of his own life. The cross thus makes sense of the double meaning of *anōthen*: To be born from above is to be born again through the lifting up of Jesus on the cross.

God so loved the world...

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. Verse 16 provides the link between the two parts of the discourse. It sums up vv. 14-15 by reiterating the salvific dimensions of Jesus' death, but moves the argument forward with its reference to God's love. God gave Jesus to the world because God loves the world.

The verb translated "give" (*didōmi*) is regularly used in the Fourth Gospel to describe God as the source of what Jesus offers the world (3:35; 5:22, 26, 36). John 3:16 is the only place in the Fourth Gospel that says God "gave" his Son to the world; the more common expression is that God "sent" Jesus, as in 3:17. (Two Greek verbs meaning "to send" [*pempō* and *apostellō*] are used interchangeably

see 3:17; 4:34; 5:23-24, 30, 36-37; 6:38.) “send” Jesus is more clearly associated with will for the world, whereas *didōmi* seems to be used in 3:16 to underscore that the incarnation derives from God’s love for the world as well as from God’s will.

“World” (*kosmos*) in John refers often to those human beings who are at odds with Jesus and God (1:10, 7:7; 15:18-19). The use of the term here suggests that God gives Jesus in love to all people, but only believers accept the gift. Verse 16 also reiterates the theme of eternal life from v. 15, but advances the argument by naming the alternative to eternal life: to perish. This verse makes clear that there is no middle ground in the Johannine vision. God’s gift of Jesus, which culminates in Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, decisively alters the options available to the world. If one believes, one’s present is altered by the gift of eternal life; if one does not believe, one perishes.

God’s gift of Jesus to the world begins the judgment of the world. Verses 17-21 explain this judgment and exemplify what is known as John’s “realized eschatology.” To speak of realized eschatology means that God’s judgment of the world is not a cosmic future event but is underway in the present, initiated by Jesus’ coming into the world. God sends the Son into the world in love in order to save the world, not condemn it (v. 17). Yet the very presence of Jesus as incarnate Word in the world confronts the world with a decision, to believe or not to believe, and making that decision is the moment of judgment. If one believes, one is saved; if one does not believe, one condemns oneself unwittingly (v. 18).

Light and Darkness

Verses 19-21 portray this intricate balance between judgment and decision in the metaphorical language of light and darkness. This language recalls the language and imagery of the Prologue (1:5, 9-10). To love darkness more than light is the same as not believing, and it results in judgment (v. 19). The way a person acts in the presence of the light is the defining mark of a person’s identity. Whether someone is good or evil is revealed solely by the decision he or she makes in the encounter with Jesus (vv. 20-21);⁸⁶ it is not predetermined in advance. “In the decision of faith or unbelief it becomes apparent what [a person] really is and ... always was. But it is revealed in such a way that the decision is made only now.”⁸⁷ Christology and anthropology are thus inseparably linked in the Fourth Gospel. Who people are is determined by their response to Jesus. These verses provide a telling conclusion to the Nicodemus narrative. Nicodemus did not believe (3:12); therefore, he remains in the darkness. He came to Jesus at night and will stay in the night.

The Fourth Gospel does include traditional understandings of eschatology and the final judgment (5:28-29), but judgment and eternal life as present tense are at the theological heart of this Gospel. It is crucial for the Fourth Evangelist that God’s judgment of the world arises precisely out of God’s love for the world. When God sent Jesus into the world, God presented the world with a critical moment of decision. God sent Jesus to save the world, but each person must decide whether to accept that offer of salvation. The world will thereby judge itself in its response to Jesus. Decision and self-judgment define Johannine eschatology. As Bultmann has written eloquently, the Fourth Gospel expresses “a radical understanding of Jesus’ appearance as the eschatological event. This event puts an end to the old course of the world. As from now on there are only believers and unbelievers, so that there are also now only saved and lost, those who have life and those who are in death. This is because the event is grounded in the love of God, that love which gives life to faith, but which must become judgment in the face of unbelief.”

Notes

John 2:23 for the feast of Passover: the expression is literally “during the Passover festival in the festival many [or crowds].” The emphasis is that these things happened among the throngs of people in Jerusalem. In other words, there were many witnesses and thus the rumors would have quickly

spread among the people and rapidly reached the ears of the leadership.

John 2:24 *Jesus would not trust himself to them*: This expression appears nowhere else in the NT.

John 3:1 *ruler of the Jews*: the word *archōn* means “ruler, prince, leader” [EDNT 1:67] and in this gospel is only said of the Pharisee and the “Jews” – terms John seems to use interchangeably. It is suggested that it will be incrementally shown that the Pharisees/Jews are historical representatives of the princes of this world (cf. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11)

John 3:2 *at night*: Rabbis did sometimes study the Law at night, but that does not seem the primary referent in this context. More significant is the fact that elsewhere in the Gospel the word ‘night’ appears to have negative connotations. In 9:4 Jesus urges people to work in the ‘day’, for the ‘night’ is coming when no-one can work. In 11:10 he says that those who walk in the ‘night’ stumble because they have no light. In 13:30, after receiving the bread from Jesus’ hand, Judas went out into the ‘night’ to betray him. Bearing these things in mind, the statement in 3:2 that Nicodemus came ‘by night’ suggests he was in a state of spiritual darkness (or at least not in the ‘light’) when he approached Jesus

John 3:10 *teacher of Israel*: thought to mean that Nicodemus was the head of a rabbinic school.

General Comment: Scholars debate whether 3:16-21 should be read as words of the Johannine Jesus or as a commentary by the Fourth Evangelist. The ancient manuscripts contained no quotation marks. The NRSV and the NIV both punctuate the verses as the words of Jesus and indicate the alternative interpretation in a footnote. The reasons given for interpreting these verses as the Evangelist’s commentary include the use of third-person pronouns to speak of Jesus and the presence of so many distinctly Johannine themes and expressions. These arguments are not compelling for two reasons. First, Jesus cannot be eliminated as the speaker of these verses simply on the basis of pronoun use. There are many other instances in the Fourth Gospel in which Jesus speaks of himself in the third person, particularly in the context of Son of Man sayings (e.g., 1:51; 3:13-15; 8:28).

Second, and more theologically significant, the arguments against the Johannine Jesus as the speaker of these verses misread the theological intent and literary strategy of the Fourth Evangelist. At many points in the Gospel, the narrative voices of the Johannine Jesus and the Fourth Evangelist overlap. Similar expressions and themes appear in the mouth of Jesus and in the Evangelist’s commentary (e.g., 6:41 and 43; 9:22 and 16:2). This similarity of voice derives from the Fourth Evangelist’s understanding of himself as a faithful interpreter of Jesus’ words and person. Everything in the Gospel bears the interpretive stamp of the Fourth Evangelist. As the narrator of Jesus’ story, the Fourth Evangelist represents Jesus’ words to a new generation of believers. As such, the Evangelist shares in one of the functions of the Paraclete, to keep Jesus’ words alive for new and changing situations and communities of faith (cf. 16:12-13).

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