

## “Entrance into the Kingdom” (Jn. 3:1-12)

### 1. A Man (1-2)

#### a. Contrasts

- i. From “man” to “a man”: “Someone once said, ‘If you want people to read what you’ve written, don’t write about Man [2:24-25], write about a man.’”<sup>1</sup> We see that ch. 3 demonstrates Jesus’ ability to pierce the hearts of individuals because He knows what is in the heart of man and, in particular, this man Nicodemus (2:24).
- ii. From Sadducee to Pharisee: “The Pharisees had no vested interest in the Temple (which was rather the domain of the Sadducees). A Pharisee would, accordingly, not have been unduly perturbed by the action of Jesus in cleansing the Temple courts. Indeed, he may possibly have approved it.”<sup>2</sup>
- iii. So first John wrote of Jesus w/ regard to all men and then proceeds to tell of personal encounters with individuals. Likewise, he first dealt with the Sadducees at the Temple and now deals with a Pharisee alone.

#### b. Credentials

- i. As mentioned, Nicodemus was a Pharisee (very devout holy man). He would have been a very skilled theologian and esteemed Jew.
- ii. “Ruler of the Jews” = Sanhedrin (highest court of Jewish rulers).

#### c. Courtesy:

- i. Nick comes to Jesus w/ great respect and praise. E.g. teacher, come from God, miracles.
- ii. Dark and light is a motif in the front of John’s account and here we see Nick come by night. It is as if he is quietly yet earnestly seeking to understand Jesus w/o distraction or condemnation. See **Further Consideration** below regarding Nicodemus’ sincerity of coming by night.

### 2. A Miracle (3-6)

#### a. Straight to the heart

- i. Notice that after what was a supreme compliment and acknowledgment of Jesus’ authority, that He didn’t take time to be flattered by Nick’s praises (read 2:25).
- ii. Instead, Jesus went straight to the heart of Nick’s inquiry – w/o Nick verbalizing a question!! Jesus is interested in truth and redemption not flattery.
- iii. “Most assuredly” = very important so listen up!

#### b. Kingdom of God

- i. Many today, unfortunately, use ‘heaven’ as a synonym for ‘kingdom of God.’ However, heaven is the temporary abode of God and dead saints until the earth is renewed and the Kingdom of God is consummated.
- ii. Many OT passages promise such an earthly reign and the Jews (especially Pharisees like Nicodemus) anticipated their participation in it. “As a devout and well-taught Jew, Nicodemus anticipated the arrival of the kingdom at the end of history. The uniqueness of Jesus’ message and mission, which took Jews like Nicodemus completely by surprise, was the fact that with the arrival of the Messiah, the kingdom (eternal life) was *inaugurated but not consummated*. Thus there ensues

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<sup>1</sup> Michaels, J. R. (2010). *The Gospel of John* (p. 176). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

<sup>2</sup> Morris, L. (1995). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 186). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

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an unexpected ‘period between’, when the kingdom has been established (eternal life is truly received), and yet the full realization of the kingdom (the full possession of eternal life) has still to take place”<sup>3</sup>

- iii. The Jews expected a future kingdom ruled by the Son of David (Isa. 9:1–7; 11:1–5, 10–11; Ezek. 34:23–24; Zech. 9:9–10), the Lord’s Servant (Isa. 42:1–7; 49:1–7), indeed, the Lord himself (Ezek. 34:11–16; 36:22–32; Zech. 14:9). Although not everyone was to be included in this kingdom, Jews in Jesus’ day generally believed that all Israelites would have a share in the world to come, with the exception of those guilty of apostasy or some other blatant sin (*m. Sanh.* 10:1). Hence it is all the more remarkable that Jesus’ stipulation that those who would enter God’s kingdom must be “born of water and the spirit” excludes Nicodemus and his fellow Sanhedrin members.<sup>4</sup>
  - iv. Note: Jesus likened the breakthrough of God’s Kingdom w/ His advent e.g. Mat. 4:17; Mk. 1:14-15.
- c. Statement of Imperative
- i. Jesus directly and compassionately declared an indispensable prerequisite for Kingdom sight – much more for its entrance (v. 5).
  - ii. Born again = Born from above. Craig Keener is helpful explaining the phrase: “Jesus speaks literally of being born “from above,” which means “from God” (“above” was a Jewish circumlocution, or roundabout expression, for God). [Not unlike, “We got rain from above” i.e. from God. See e.g. 3:31; 4:7; 5:1, 4; 19:11] One could also construe the phrase as meaning “reborn,” which Nicodemus takes literally. (Ancient writers, including those of the Old Testament—Jer 1:11–12; Mic 1:10–15—often used plays on words, and John includes quite a few other puns; they also sometimes used other characters as less intelligent foils for a narrative’s main spokesperson.) Because Jewish teachers spoke of Gentile converts to Judaism as starting life anew like “newborn children” (just as adopted sons under Roman law relinquished all legal status in their former family when they became part of a new one), Nicodemus should have understood that Jesus meant conversion; but it never occurs to him that someone Jewish would need to convert to the true faith of Israel.<sup>5</sup>
- d. Reply of Ridicule (4)
- i. “It’s obvious that a physical rebirth is impossible – especially an old guy like me.”
  - ii. Ignorance is frustrating and it is obvious to us, as well as it was to Nicodemus, that Jesus was speaking of something supernatural.
  - iii. It’s easy to be critical, sarcastic, dismissive, and frustrated (if not infuriated) when you are clueless and you ought to be savvy w/ regard to a subject. You think you’re equipped and ready to debate and then someone presents an argument or statement

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<sup>3</sup> Milne, B. (1993). [\*The message of John: here is your king!: with study guide\*](#) (p. 75). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

· *m. Mishnah*

· *Sanh. Sanhedrin*

<sup>4</sup> Köstenberger, A. J. (2007). [\*John\*](#). In *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament* (p. 434). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos.

<sup>5</sup> Keener, C. S. (1993). [\*The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament\*](#) (Jn 3:3–4). Downers Grove, IL: IVP.

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that you cannot refute.

iv. Nick goes to Jesus for affirmation and knowledge and he gets baffled instead.

### e. Miracle of Regeneration (5-6)

i. Far from ignoring Nicodemus’s comment, he matches one impossibility with another. Just as it is *impossible* to do what Jesus has been doing *unless* “God is with him,” so it is *impossible* to “see the kingdom of God” *unless* one is “born from above.”<sup>6</sup>

ii. “Jesus explains to Nicodemus that religious knowledge and ethnicity are not a sufficient basis for a relationship with God; one must be born into his family by the Spirit.”<sup>7</sup>

iii. It isn’t about re-entering the womb but entering the Kingdom of God.

iv. Read 1:12-14. A spiritual conversion is required – even by the Jewish elite.

“There are references to proselytes who were admitted to the Jewish religion as being like children newly born.<sup>23</sup> Nicodemus may have felt that the term appropriate to the Gentile as he entered the ranks of the chosen people was the last word that should be applied to one who was not only a Jew but a Pharisee, and a member of the Sanhedrin.”<sup>24 8</sup>

v. “What turns out to be ridiculous is not Jesus’ pronouncement, but Nicodemus’s crudely literal interpretation of it. Entering the womb a second time is as absurd as building a temple in three days (2:20), or having a camel go through the eye of a needle (see Mk 10:25). Yet at the same time the incredulous words, “How can?” and “Can he?” actually reinforce the point that salvation is “impossible” without the rebirth of which Jesus has spoken.”<sup>9</sup>

vi. Necessity of spiritual birth (regeneration) is required because like begets like – flesh unto flesh and spirit to spirit (see \*1 Cor. 15:35-58). Entrance into the Kingdom is found in the new birth, a spiritual birth, a supernatural birth, a heavenly birth. John opened his account with a new creation, told of the first sign in the miracle of new wine, then of Jesus’ testimony of the new Temple, and here records the message of new birth. Subsequently, he will write of the new water and new life.

### 3. A Mystery (7-12)

a. *Apprehending* a mystery is not necessarily *comprehending* a mystery. Jesus didn’t expect Nick to understand the full implications and logistics of such a rebirth but there was sufficient means in the Scripture to see the necessity for it. Nick could not be expected to know what the authors of the NT knew. However, he, being a “teacher of Israel,” should have known the promises and necessity of God’s provisions for a new heart, mind, spirit, and cleansing e.g. Isa. 44:3; Jer. 31:31; Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:25-27.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Michaels. 179.

<sup>7</sup> Keener, C. S. (1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament* (Jn 3:1–8). Downers Grove, IL: IVP.

<sup>3</sup> 23 SBk, II, p. 423.

<sup>4</sup> 24 Cf. Findlay, “as though in modern times an Anglican dignitary or eminent Nonconformist divine were told to go and get converted in an evangelical mission hall!” (p. 57).

<sup>8</sup> Morris, L. (1995). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 190). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Michaels. 182.

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- b. The Pneuma
  - i. Pneuma – both wind and spirit/breath. We use it today w/ regard to drills, sprayers, etc. E.g. pneumatic drill used the power of air pressure.
  - ii. The pneuma blows mysteriously and so too those born via the Pneuma.
- c. The Challenge (9-10)
  - i. “Opening the window and letting the breeze in can be very inconvenient, especially for the Nicodemuses of this world who suppose they have got things tidied up, labelled and sorted into neat piles.”<sup>10</sup>
  - ii. Things we ought to know sometimes allude us because of our hard hearts. We presume much. The Jews – especially the dedicated ones – presumed their lineage and/or their religious adherence was assurance of the Kingdom. →
  - iii. Jesus spoke of the promised miracle of a supernatural birth – a literal miracle which has nothing to do with ethnicity (see e.g. Gal. 3:28-29 cf. Jn. 8:31-59; Ro. 9:6ff.).
  - iv. Such a salvation can only come “from above.” Religion = from ground up while Salvation = from heaven down!
  - v. Nicodemus was certainly familiar with pertaining passages hence Jesus said, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?” Jesus would employ such speech at times e.g. Mat. 12:3 “Have you not read...?”
  - vi. R U born again? You may know something of Jesus dying on a cross for our sins. However, have you trusted such with a confession unto salvation? 1 Jn. 5:13; Ro. 10:9-13; Jn. 3:16.

PC:

Do you want to be a participant in the Kingdom of God? God rules universally whether you acknowledge such or not. But do you earnestly pray, “Thy Kingdom come and will be done in my life here on earth as holiness is done in heaven.”? If you don’t earnestly desire God working in and through your life, you are not born again. Not all want to participate in the Kingdom. But if you do, you must be born from above to have access into an everlasting Kingdom where the universal reign of God becomes very personal and particular to you. Has the Spirit breathed a new spiritual life into you?

### Further Consideration:

Coming by Night: “Joseph of Arimathea, is said to have been “a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews” (19:38). At that point Nicodemus himself is reintroduced, and possibly the accompanying reminder that he had come to Jesus “at night” (19:39) implies that he too was a secret disciple, and for the same reason. But in contrast to the “rulers” of 12:42, who “loved the glory of humans instead of the glory of God” (12:43), the writer puts no blame either on Joseph in chapter 19 or on Nicodemus here.”<sup>19</sup>

“One might come by night to avoid being seen, or because Jewish teachers who worked during the day

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<sup>10</sup> Wright, T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-10* (p. 30). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

<sup>9</sup> 19 Compare the disciples “behind locked doors for fear of the Jews” when they saw the risen Lord (20:19; compare v. 26).

<sup>11</sup> Michaels, J. R. (2010). *The Gospel of John* (p. 178). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

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could study only at night (cf. Ps 119:148; the latter was undoubtedly not the case with Nicodemus, who would not need to work—v. 1). But John includes the detail because it serves the theme of light and darkness (11:10; 13:30) that brackets this narrative (3:19–21).<sup>12</sup>

In short, if both water and Spirit mean “life” in the Gospel of John, then birth from “water and Spirit” means the beginning of new life “from above,” or what this Gospel calls “eternal life” (*zōē aiōnion*). The word “life,” used only twice in the Gospel so far (1:4, “In him was *life*, and the *life* was the light of humans”), will recur again and again beginning in this chapter (vv. 15 and 16, twice in v. 36, plus thirty more occurrences in chapters 4–21).<sup>46</sup> “Born of water and Spirit,” therefore, becomes simply the writer’s way of defining “the kingdom of God” as “life” or “eternal life,” with the effect of actually *replacing* “kingdom of God” with “life”<sup>13</sup>

\*\*\*\*\* As Christians today contemplate the Lord’s return aright only if in consequence they purify themselves (1 Jn. 3:1–3), so Jews in Jesus’ day best anticipated the coming of the Messiah when they most wanted to be transformed in line with the promises of life under the messianic age—to enjoy a new heart for God, cleansing and the fulness of the Spirit (e.g. Je. 31:28ff.; Ezk. 36:25–27).<sup>14</sup>

The coming-to-faith of the first followers of Jesus was in certain respects unique: they *could not* instantly become ‘Christians’ in the full-orbed sense, and experience the full sweep of the new birth, until *after* the resurrection and glorification of Jesus. If we take the Gospel records seriously, we must conclude that Jesus sometimes proclaimed truth the full significance and application of which could be fully appreciated and experienced only after he had risen from the dead. John 3 falls under this category.<sup>15</sup>

Vv. 11-12 Why is it plural here? One possible answer is that Jesus includes his disciples with himself in the pronouncement. Just as Nicodemus is part of a larger group, so too is Jesus. Yet Jesus’ disciples have not been mentioned since 2:17 and 22. They play no explicit part in his encounter with Nicodemus, even though their presence with Jesus in Jerusalem is presupposed (see below, v. 22). Another suggestion is that Jesus aligns himself with the biblical prophets, or perhaps specifically with John, who was earlier said to “have seen” and “testified that this is the Son of God” (1:34). Another is that Jesus and the Father speak with one voice.<sup>68</sup> Still another is that the plurals refer not only to Jesus and his

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<sup>12</sup> Keener, C. S. (1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament* (Jn 3:2). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>46</sup> Even in the synoptic tradition “life” and “kingdom of God” can be used interchangeably (specifically with the verb “enter”; see Mk 9:43, 45, 47; compare also Mt 7:14; 18:8, 9; 19:16, 17, 29).

<sup>13</sup> Michaels, J. R. (2010). *The Gospel of John* (p. 185). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

<sup>14</sup> Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 188). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

<sup>15</sup> Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 196). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

<sup>68</sup> See Abbott, *Johannine Grammar*, 312 (compare 8:16–18); also Chrysostom, *Homily 26*: “The expression ‘we know,’ He uses then either concerning Himself and His Father, or concerning Himself alone” (NPNF, 1st ser., 14.92). But the words, “we testify to what we have seen,” can hardly be true of Jesus and the Father in quite the same sense.

disciples within the narrative, but to his continuing testimony in and through the Johannine community in its mission to, and its conflict with, the Jewish synagogue at the time the Gospel was written.<sup>69</sup> Or perhaps Jesus is simply mocking Nicodemus, as he did with the phrase “the teacher of Israel,” by echoing the self-assured “we know” of verse 2.<sup>70</sup> A solemn “Amen, amen” pronouncement, however, is an unlikely vehicle for satire. Jesus is deadly serious in assuring Nicodemus of the validity of the revelation he brings to the world. The fact is that there is no way to tell who, if anyone, is included with Jesus in the “we” and the “our.” Plural or not, the accent is on Jesus’ activity, and his alone. As the writer will shortly make clear, it is “the One who comes from above” or “from heaven” (v. 31) of whom it is said, “What he has seen and heard, this he testifies, and no one receives his testimony” (v. 32), and this person can only be Jesus. In the present verse Jesus could just as easily have said, “I speak what I know, and I testify to what I have seen, and you people do not receive my testimony.”

The question therefore remains: Why the plurals? The most plausible answer is that *it is still too early in the Gospel* for Jesus to speak authoritatively in the first person as the Revealer of God. Aside from the “Amen, amen” formula itself, Jesus does not begin to speak authoritatively as “I” until he meets the Samaritan woman in chapter 4.<sup>71</sup> All ten of the occurrences of the emphatic “I” (*egō*) in chapters 1–3 are on the lips of John, not of Jesus.<sup>72</sup> Here if anywhere we might have expected it because here Jesus solemnly attests to the validity not of a single pronouncement (as with the “Amen, amen” formula) but of everything he has said or will say. He speaks with unique and sovereign authority, but the plurals serve to deflect the uniqueness somewhat until John has yielded up the spotlight to Jesus (vv. 27–30), and until Jesus has been more formally presented as “the One who comes from above” and who “testifies to what he has seen and heard” (vv. 31–32). Only then will Jesus be ready to use the emphatic “I,” and he promptly does so (repeatedly) in the next chapter.<sup>73</sup> <sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> 69 See Barrett, 211; Schackenburg, 1.375–76. Bernard finds here not “the actual words of Jesus so much as the profound conviction of the Apostolic age that the Church’s teaching rested on the testimony of eye-witnesses” (1.110, citing 1 Jn 1:1–2 and 4:14). Hoskyns (216) combines several of these interpretations into one with the comment that “Jesus did not confront Judaism alone,” citing 5:30–47, and appealing to John, Moses and the prophets, Jesus’ disciples, and (implicitly) the author and readers of the Gospel as examples of those included in the “we.”

<sup>0</sup> 70 According to Brown (1.132), “the use of ‘we’ is a parody of Nicodemus’s hint of arrogance.”

<sup>1</sup> 71 See, for example, 4:14: “Whoever drinks of the water which I will give” (ἐγὼ δώσω); 4:26, “I am he [ἐγὼ εἰμι], the One speaking to you”; 4:32, “I [ἐγὼ] have food to eat that you do not know”; 4:38, “I [ἐγὼ] have sent you to harvest.” Such language continues to characterize Jesus’ speech throughout the rest of the Gospel.

<sup>2</sup> 72 See 1:20, 23, 26, 27, 30, 31 (twice), 33, 34; 3:28. The closest Jesus comes to such a pronouncement in chapters 1–3 is his promise that “I will raise” (ἐγερῶ) the temple in three days (2:19). While the “I” here is not the emphatic ἐγὼ, Jesus’ opponents respond with an emphatic “you” (καὶ σὺ, v. 20).

<sup>3</sup> 73 Bultmann’s comments are remarkably similar: “The Evangelist has retained the plural because in a peculiar manner he disguises the person of Jesus and conceals the fact that ultimately Jesus is the only one who speaks from knowledge and who bears witness to what he has seen. He wants the discourse to retain its air of mystery, and he does not yet wish to state clearly that Jesus is the Revealer” (146); compare also Staley, *The Print’s First Kiss*, 61: “Jesus never uses the first person pronoun *egō* in these three chapters—only John does; and in Jesus’ one extended monologue (3:11–21), he speaks of himself only in the third person or first person plural. This peculiarity also changes after chapter 4.”

<sup>16</sup> Michaels, J. R. (2010). *The Gospel of John* (pp. 190–192). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

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The presumption is that when we are dealing with spiritual realities such as birth from above (“heavenly things,” if you will), they are more easily understood when couched in metaphorical language. But if the metaphors are not understood and the hearers do not come to faith (as is the case here), there is little hope that a direct and explicit presentation of the “heavenly things” will do any good.<sup>79</sup> Logically, the reader could infer from this that Jesus will not speak of “heavenly things” in this Gospel. In fact the opposite is true, for in due course he will do exactly that.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> 79 Consequently, while Sasse’s reference to John 16:25 (see n. 78) is appropriate, Barrett’s reference to Mark 4:11f. (n. 77) is not, because in Mark the purpose of “parables” is not to make Jesus’ proclamation easier to understand, but harder. Mark’s “parables” (παραβολαί), unlike John’s παροιμιαί in chapter 16 (or τὰ επίγεια here), are actually “riddles” designed to hide the truth.

<sup>17</sup> Michaels, J. R. (2010). *The Gospel of John* (p. 194). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.