

2. John's commentary (2:21-25) following Jesus' cleansing of the temple provided his transition into the next context, namely the Lord's encounter with Nicodemus (3:1-21). In his commentary John noted that Jesus performed various signs while He was in Jerusalem for the Passover and these signs led many to believe in Him – i.e., believe that He was the Messiah. At the same time, John indicated that this belief was illegitimate because their concept of the Messiah was flawed. He didn't say as much, but suggested this indirectly by observing that Jesus didn't embrace their "faith" (in John's language, He didn't entrust Himself to them). He discerned the falseness of their faith ("He knew all men"), and many have seen in this a veiled reference to Jesus' deity. But, in context, Jesus' insight didn't derive from divine omniscience, but from the fact that He was Himself an Israelite well familiar with the messianic doctrine taught by the rabbis and embraced by His countrymen. He had been raised in the prevailing conception of the Messiah and the messianic work and kingdom and thus understood that these Israelites' "faith" in Him was based on their presumption that He was *that* sort of Messiah.

At this point some might object that this is reading too much into John's commentary. And considered in isolation, this is a fair objection. But John already alluded to Israel's unbelief (1:11), and reading through his entire account shows this dynamic of false faith to be a core theme standing at the heart of virtually every episode John recorded. But more narrowly, John immediately followed his commentary with a story which he intended to both substantiate and exemplify the point he was making (3:1-21). For Nicodemus was one of those individuals in Jerusalem who observed Jesus' signs and reached a conclusion concerning Him (ref. 3:2). *Nicodemus proved John's point, and did so in a particularly compelling way because of his unique status as a leading scholar – if not **the** leading scholar – in Israel.* If this eminent biblical scholar misjudged Jesus, how much more would that be expected of the general populace?

In terms of the setting, John provided no background for Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. He noted only that this man came to Jesus by night and that he was a ruler of the Jews (i.e., a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court). His account does indicate, however, that Nicodemus had some familiarity with Jesus, having witnessed the signs He had been performing in Jerusalem (ref. 2:23). This suggests that this encounter took place during the same Passover episode recorded in chapter two. But the setting wasn't John's concern, evident in the fact that the entire episode consists of a dialog.

This context consists of a dialog which is comprised of three questions and their respective answers. As with any conversation, each successive question flows out of the preceding answer so that there is both movement and development as the context advances. This development is also reflected in the fact that each of Jesus' responses was longer and more thorough than its predecessor(s) (cf. 3:3, 5-8, and 10-21). At the same time, Jesus prefaced each of His responses with the formula, "*Truly, truly, I say to you...*" This exact expression is unique to John's gospel, although the abbreviated form is common in the synoptic accounts (ref. Matthew 5:18, 26, 6:2-5, 25:12-45; Mark 3:28, 8:12, 10:15, 29, 14:9-30; Luke 4:24, 12:37, 44, 18:17, 29, 21:3, 32; etc.). But in whichever form, Jesus employed this formula in order to highlight the veracity and gravity of the statements which follow.

Though the content, flow and general meaning of this passage are not in dispute, there is no scholarly consensus regarding its structural arrangement and if and how it ought to be partitioned. It does seem, however, that the passage naturally divides into two sections. Considered in terms of the larger contextual issue of misguided faith, this context speaks to the matter of its remedy: The first section answers the question of the remedy *itself* (3:1-8), while the second speaks to the remedy's *origin* and *operation* (3:9-21). Put simply, the first section answers the question of *what* and the second section the question of *how* (ref. v. 9). Thus the first division consists of the first two questions and answers while Nicodemus' third question and Jesus' response comprises the second division.

- a. John recorded that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Most likely he did so because he regarded a meeting with Jesus as a risky endeavor which prudence dictated should be kept private. Apparently, then, the Jewish authorities – the Sanhedrin and priests – had already formed a contrary opinion of Jesus and were voicing opposition to Him and His message, at least among themselves. Certainly it wouldn't be long before men would have to carefully count the cost of aligning with Him, Nicodemus among them (cf. 7:1-13, 37-53, 9:1-34, 19:38-39).

But it seems that John also drew a metaphor from this visit under the cloak of darkness: *Nicodemus came by night as a supposedly illumined rabbi, but he was actually a man still shrouded in darkness.* For all men exist in the darkness of delusion and unbelief and only come into the light when they embrace in truth the One who is the light (cf. 3:19-21 with 1:4-11).

- b. Whatever introductions may have occurred between the two men, John began his account with Nicodemus making an assertion regarding Jesus (3:2). He didn't ask a question as such, but his statement embodies an implicit one, namely the question of whether he was right in what he was asserting. Nicodemus began his conversation with Jesus by telling Him what he was convinced of (“*we know...*”); Jesus' response showed that this learned rabbi was misguided in what he thought he knew; for all his confidence, Nicodemus really didn't understand the truth of what he was saying; he should have phrased his affirmation as a question.

Nicodemus addressed Jesus as *rabbi*, (teacher), explaining that the signs Jesus had been performing convinced him that He was sent by God. And he wasn't alone; others shared his conviction. John didn't clarify who these individuals were (ref. 2:23) and whether they were among the common people only or included others among Israel's rulers. However, Nicodemus' clandestine visit suggests that his view wasn't widely shared by the Sanhedrin.

- c. Jesus' response was brief and direct (3:3). Most importantly, it appears at first glance to be completely unrelated to what Nicodemus had just said to him. Nicodemus spoke of his conviction that Jesus was a teacher commissioned by God; Jesus replied with an assertion regarding the *kingdom of God* – notably, the first mention of the kingdom in John's account. (Outside of this context, John mentioned the kingdom only one other time – ref. 18:36).

The synoptic writers have the kingdom of God (kingdom of heaven) as a central theme in their accounts and they all associate it with Jesus' person (Luke 1:26-33, 17:20-21), His proclamation (Matthew 4:12-23, 5:1-20, 13:1-53; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:38-44) and His work (Matthew 12:22-28; Mark 9:1-9; Luke 10:1-11). John used the expression in a more generic way, but his meaning obviously accords with that put forth by Matthew, Mark and Luke.

And so, what seems to be an unrelated response to Nicodemus' affirmation is actually nothing of the sort. Jesus *was* speaking directly to Nicodemus' statement, but by way of insisting that he really didn't understand what he was affirming. Nicodemus didn't come right out and ask Jesus who He was, but Jesus discerned that this was what he wanted to know. For Israel had had many rabbis through the centuries, but none whose words were attended with miraculous signs. Yahweh's *prophets* had been teachers of this sort, and Nicodemus may well have wondered if Jesus was the prophet promised by Moses (cf. Deuteronomy 18:15-18 with John 1:21, 6:11-14, 7:37-40). But, because the traditional view was that God would send this prophet in connection with the dawning of the messianic age and the eschatological kingdom, if Jesus was that man, then the time of the kingdom was at hand. Indeed, hadn't Jesus been proclaiming this very thing?

With this frame of reference, Jesus' response makes perfect sense; Nicodemus' affirmation of Jesus was actually a statement regarding the kingdom of God. Jesus recognized this and replied that, whatever Nicodemus may have believed about Him, his conception was necessarily flawed because his notion of the kingdom was flawed. And the proof of that is the fact that the actual reality of the kingdom is hidden from natural scrutiny; *one must be born from above in order to rightly discern it*. Several things about this statement are important to note:

- 1) The first thing to consider is the concept of the kingdom of God. While some scholars want to distinguish between this phrase and its counterpart, *kingdom of heaven*, a careful comparison indicates that the two phrases are synonymous. For many contemporary Christians, the concept of the kingdom of God has to do with a purported future millennial kingdom. But in biblical usage, the kingdom of God refers to the dynamic of God's relationship with His creation and the way in which He administers it. It was first portrayed in Eden and then later in the Israelite kingdom.

As an eschatological concept, the kingdom of God refers to the ultimate design and realization of the Creator-creature relationship in which the heavenly realm and rule extend to embrace the natural sphere.

In terms of the language and imagery of the Scripture, the kingdom of God involves the conjunction of heaven and earth such that the earthly realm becomes the divine sanctuary in which God and man commune and from which God exercises His lordship over His creation in and through man, the image-son who finds his true identity in the singular Image-Son.

Jesus expressed the reality of the kingdom of God in terms of God's will being done on earth as in heaven (Matthew 6:10). For his part, Paul described this phenomenon as the creation being "summed up in Christ" and God being "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:25-28; Ephesians 1:9-10), while John saw the kingdom of God manifested as the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven to rest upon the earth (Revelation 21:1-3).

The kingdom of God involves the conjoining of heaven and earth and the Scriptures spoke of this as being realized through Yahweh's triumphal theophany in His Servant-Messiah. This is why the mere presence of Jesus, the incarnate Word and messianic Servant, signaled that the time was fulfilled and the kingdom of God was at hand. This is also why, when Nicodemus came to Jesus expressing his conviction that He had come from God, Jesus confronted him with the kingdom of God and the fact that his conception of it was erroneous and misguided.

- 2) The next thing to note is that Jesus here denied to men in their natural state the ability to correctly discern the kingdom of God. This accords with the above definition, for Jesus was implying that God's kingdom isn't a natural reality or phenomenon (ref. again 18:36). Rather, the truths of the kingdom are *mysteries* which must be revealed to men (Matthew 13:1-11), and this revelation must come from something or someone beyond the natural realm. But Jesus' denial also implies that the Scripture's presentation of the kingdom is insufficient to secure men's understanding. The kingdom of God is the central theme in the scriptural storyline, and yet even mastery of the biblical text will not enable men to rightly grasp it. Nicodemus' unexcelled scholarship as Israel's teacher left him in the dark and the same was true of the distinguished disciple of Gamaliel and eminent Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus (cf. Galatians 1:11-17 with Acts 9:9-19).
 - 3) A third matter is the ambiguity of the phrase, "born again." This phrase has two distinct meanings as determined by the Greek adverb which can convey either a spatial or temporal sense. Hence the phrase can mean *born again* (temporal sense) or *born from above* (spatial sense). Here it seems John had both meanings in mind, for both are suggested by the larger context. Discerning the kingdom of God requires a distinct "birth" – one that is spiritual rather than natural. Thus it is both a new birth (*born again*) and a supra-natural birth (*born from above*).
- d. Though he didn't seem to recognize it at the time, Nicodemus' response proved Jesus' assertion; for all his scriptural knowledge, Nicodemus processed Jesus' words through his natural perspective and thought pattern. When he heard Jesus speak of being *born*, the concept of natural birth was the only reference point available to him. And from that perspective, Jesus' statement was absurd (3:4); He was conveying *spiritual* truths – truths which have their substance and life outside the natural realm – to a man constrained by *natural* (fleshly) thinking.

- e. Jesus made this clear by the way he answered Nicodemus' question. The absurdity Nicodemus found in His words was the result of confusing the spiritual and the natural (3:5-8). Jesus wasn't speaking about another natural birth, but a birth wrought by "*water and the Spirit.*" Many have treated this expression as referring to the two births Jesus was contrasting: a natural birth through *water* (i.e., amniotic fluid) and a spiritual birth by the *Holy Spirit*. Others have connected both water and Spirit with the idea of spiritual birth, but in the sense that the waters of *baptism* are said to work with the Spirit in securing this birth. Indeed, the Scripture *does* point toward water and Spirit both pertaining to the spiritual birth, but in a different manner than above: *Water* connotes the cleansing dimension of this birth, while *Spirit* connotes its spiritual source and nature (cf. Ezekiel 36:22-29 with Isaiah 44:1-5; cf. also Ezekiel 16:4 in which water relates to a cleansing *after* birth, not the birth process itself; note also Ephesians 5:25-27). This understanding is further supported by three contextual features: 1) the fact that John conjoined both nouns (*water, Spirit*) with a single preposition (*out of*); 2) his use of the phrase, "*born of the flesh,*" to denote natural birth; 3) the fact that this birth out of water is necessary to entering the kingdom of God.

Jesus wasn't talking about a second natural birth, but a supra-natural birth by the Spirit; a birth in which the person's uncleanness is purged away. Nicodemus evidently was baffled by this notion and, at some level, his confusion was understandable. Though the Scripture employs this sort of birth language, it does so primarily in terms of the *nation of Israel* (ref. Isaiah 66:5-9; Ezekiel 37:1-14) and it seems the rabbis had come to view Israel's "rebirth" in national and geo-political terms, not in the ontological sense of individual people being "reborn."

Verse 5 clarifies verse 3 and thereby shows that *perceiving* the kingdom must be understood in terms of *entering* it, even as being *born again* (from above) is a birth *by water and the Spirit*. Hence perceiving the kingdom amounts to discerning it in truth resulting in faith and entrance into it. And this compelling illumination is the work of the enlivening and cleansing Spirit. *Nicodemus couldn't discern the kingdom of God, not because he didn't know and believe the Scriptures and their promises concerning the kingdom, but because his understanding and expectation derived from a natural mind and natural thinking.*

Jesus recognized that His words left Nicodemus perplexed and astonished (3:7) and He spoke to his bewilderment by reminding him of the mysterious way in which the Spirit works (3:8). He did so by drawing an analogy between the Spirit and the wind, a familiar analogy since Hebrew (and Greek) employs one noun to denote both spirit and wind (also *breath* as animating principle; cf. Genesis 2:7; Job 34:14f; Ecclesiastes 12:7). Both are unavailable to the senses except in their effects; *neither one is detectable as it is in itself, but only in its interaction with the physical creation*. Here, Jesus emphasized a specific aspect of this phenomenon: Wind and Spirit are discerned only in terms of their *present, observable effect* and that detection affords no further insight. Thus Jesus' point: The Spirit's work can be observed, but not His purpose, mind or method.