

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Vox Evangelica* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_vox\\_evangelica.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_vox_evangelica.php)

## *Sociolinguistics and Biblical Interpretation*

**Peter Cotterell**

[p.61]

It is an unfortunate consequence of scholarly specialization that we have created disciplines which exist in isolation from one another. Advances made in one discipline but relevant to another may only with great difficulty cross the specialization barrier between the two. In physics the philosophical implications of relativity theory have scarcely begun to make themselves felt in Christian theology, and in linguistics the advances made in understanding human communication processes in general and discourse in particular have made little impact on Bible exegesis.

In the past two decades great advances have been made by sociolinguists in the analysis of real discourse (as opposed to the analysis of artificially contrived samples of 'language'). We now know that behind the apparent randomness of conversation there lie certain regularities which allow for such features as the determination of next speaker, the orderly presentation of new topics, and the existence of an assumed pool of knowledge shared by all participants.

The present article is an attempt to introduce some of these discourse considerations within the context of the Nicodemus *pericope*. The assumption is that the text represents an abridged version of a real conversation and that by detailed attention to text and cotext the assumed context can be re-created, leading to a new and valid understanding of the dialogue.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Until very recently it has been generally held amongst New Testament scholars that John's gospel was written very late (Baur was prepared to suggest AD 170, a proposal whose absurdity was decisively demonstrated by the discovery of the Rylands Papyrus 457 consisting of parts of John chapter 18 and dated around AD 130). But even when the date of writing of John's gospel was brought into the first century there was still a consensus that it did not represent *history*, however we might be prepared to consider its theology.

The very contrast between the three synoptics, and all that is implied by that term, and the fourth gospel inevitably directs attention to questions of historicity, and clearly the later the date assigned to a New

[p.62]

Testament work the greater the question raised concerning its authenticity as a record of real events.

The question of authorship is not irrelevant. The identity of the Beloved Disciple and his relationship to the author has been endlessly debated with some ingenuity but little agreement. Raymond E. Brown offers a rather complex solution to the question of authorship, proposing five stages:

- A verbal tradition originating with John
- The development of that tradition through a Johannine school

The creation of a written version of the developed tradition  
A revised version  
A final redaction after the death of John<sup>1</sup>

In a striking book published in 1976, *Redating the New Testament*, J. A. T. Robinson undertook a total review of all the evidence assumed to lie behind the currently accepted dating for the New Testament literature. Robinson's revolutionary conclusions, particularly as they related to the four gospels, required much earlier dates than had hitherto been supposed, and brought into question the supposed priority of Mark. His book was followed by a posthumous major work, *The Priority of John*<sup>2</sup> which argued uncompromisingly for a date prior to AD 70.

Robinson himself drew attention to W. F. Albright's comment from 1966, 'All the concrete arguments for a late date for the Johannine literature have now been dissipated', and added as a defiant postscript to *Redating the New Testament* a letter from no less a scholar than C. H. Dodd concurring at least with Robinson's stated goal:

I should agree with you that much of this late dating is quite arbitrary, even wanton, the offspring not of any argument that can be presented but rather of the critic's prejudice that if he appears to assent to the traditional position of the early church he will be thought no better than a stick-in-the-mud. The whole business is due for radical re-examination.<sup>3</sup>

Within the general framework of doubt the Nicodemus dialogue in John chapter three has been variously interpreted. Perhaps typical is C. K. Barrett's comment on Nicodemus:

As the discussion proceeds he is quickly forgotten... We are made to hear not a conversation between two persons but the dialogue of church and synagogue.<sup>4</sup>

For many years it has seemed to me that scholars exegete the scriptures both of the Old Testament and of the New Testament as if they had been produced by anonymous computers or at best by individuals with none of the normal range of human emotions. Developments in Sociolinguistics in the past two decades should have

[p.63]

made us much more aware of the importance of understanding *context* as well as *cotext* before attempting to interpret narrative. It is unfortunately the case that few sociolinguists have any connection with theology, and fewer still theologians seem to have any awareness of the highly relevant advances being made in sociolinguistics.

In the course of my own teaching at London Bible College I became particularly interested in the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. It was clear that the dialogue as it is given to us could be no more than a partial account of any real interview, but as I studied that partial account I became intrigued with the possibility of re-creating the original context in such a way that the partial record would come to life.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Gospel according to John* (London, 1971) xxxiv-xxxvii. It is ironical that in his introduction Brown comments, 'Too often... difficulties have been created by not respecting the intention of the author, and complicated hypotheses have been constructed where simple explanations were available.' (xxiv).

<sup>2</sup> London, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> The letter is dated June 1972.

<sup>4</sup> *The Gospel according to St. John* (London, 1978<sup>2</sup>) 202.

This article is an expansion of my 'The Nicodemus Conversation' in *The Expository Times* 96, 8 (May 1985), pages 237-242. My intention here is not merely to deal with the Nicodemus pericope but to use it as an illustration of the exegetical tools now available to us from the field of linguistics in general and sociolinguistics in particular.

### SEMANTICS: A NEW EMPHASIS

In 1964 Stephen Neill drew the attention of New Testament scholars to the importance of James Barr's *The Semantics of Biblical Language*.<sup>5</sup> He commented: '...a large stone was thrown ... into the calm pool of Biblical studies.'<sup>6</sup> What Barr had done, among other things, was to question the word-centred approach to the interpretation of the biblical text, an approach which had tended to dominate Bible exegesis through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to that point.

At the same time a revolution was taking place within the discipline of linguistics. Linguistics as a science is relatively young. Ferdinand de Saussure, often designated the founder of modern linguistics, had his *Cours de Linguistique Générale* published posthumously only in 1916.<sup>7</sup>

A new line had been taken by linguistics following the publication by Noam Chomsky in 1957 of *Syntactic Structures* which introduced a synthetic approach to language, as opposed to the familiar analytic approach. However, the earlier models produced by Chomsky had a fundamental weakness: grammar was held to be autonomous and independent of semantics. Thus his celebrated sentence 'colourless green ideas sleep furiously' was to be reckoned grammatical since adjectives, qualified noun, verb and adverb succeed one another in appropriate order even though together they are non-sense.

However, in 1963, only two years after Barr's book on semantics; J. J. Katz and J. A. Fodor published an article in *Language* entitled 'The Structure of a Semantic Theory'<sup>8</sup> in which an attempt was made to introduce semantics into generative grammar. And two years after that Chomsky produced *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* in which he made some concessions to the relationship between semantics and generative

[p.64]

grammar. He was generally opposed to the more radical theories of Katz, Fodor, Postal and others, but this has not served to prevent semantics becoming the focus of linguistic study in the present decade.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> OUP, 1961.

<sup>6</sup> In *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1961* (OUP, 1964) representing the 1962 Firth Lectures.

<sup>7</sup> ET by W. Baskin (New York, 1959, and London, 1966).

<sup>8</sup> *Language* 39 (1963). Note also John Lyons' comment in his *Semantics* 2 (CUP, 1977, 409): 'When Chomsky first put forward the theory of generative grammar (in a version that has since been substantially modified) he had little to say about the possibilities of integrating phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics within a unified model of a language system.' The whole of section 10.5 of *Semantics* outlines the developing awareness of those involved in generative grammar of the centrality of semantics to all worthwhile linguistic work.

<sup>9</sup> See especially Noam Chomsky, *Language and Responsibility* (The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1979) ch 6.

And as a result of this interest in semantics a new awareness has emerged of the importance of an understanding of the structures of units of language larger than the word, the phrase or even the sentence: the importance, in fact, of the structure of the discourse itself, discourse analysis.

### THE THEORY OF DISCOURSE

Discourse relates to real language. A sentence may be constructed on paper with no clear relationship to the circumstances which gave birth to it. I might write here 'His name is Edward' but the sentence has no clear relationship to the context within which it was produced: a man sitting at a typewriter at night. If the *sentence* is encountered as an *utterance* the pronominal form would be supplied with its referent either in its context, the preceding sentence, perhaps, or in its context, by someone waving his hand in the direction of Edward.

Sentences appear on paper and may be used as amenable and submissive objective entities for the linguist to analyse. Utterances, however, are part of the raw material used by sociolinguists.<sup>10</sup> Utterances are far more 'elusive' than sentences, and it is often extremely difficult to determine conclusively what certain utterances 'mean'. The problem here is related to the process of communication. A useful model uses six stages, passing from the conception of something to be communicated to the perception of the communication by way of an encoding and transmission stage, controlled by the speaker, and a reception and decoding stage controlled by the listener. Imprecision in coding, transmission, reception and decoding stages leads to imprecision in the perception stage.

And to make matters more difficult the speaker may be either unaware of the real message he was encoding, or unwilling to admit to the message, so that he can disown the message if it seems politic to do so.<sup>11</sup> In the same way the listener, possibly because of his relationship to the speaker, may 'perceive' a message that cannot be detected by anyone else. If he claims to perceive it, on what grounds can anyone else deny that it is there? Certainly not by analysing the offending utterance as though it were a cold sentence.

There is, in fact, an ultimate imprecision in utterances that is likely to discourage the linguist looking for objectivity in his theories of language.

Fortunately we have help in attempting to analyse utterances, language in context. In genuine discourse there are clear presuppositions. H. H. Clark and E. V. Clark in *Psychology and Language* identify five principles:<sup>12</sup>

[p.65]

1. Knowledge of the listener. This knowledge determines what information shall be given and what can be assumed to be already present. In fact in discourse there is always what

---

<sup>10</sup> On the distinction between sentence and utterance see R. E. Longacre, *The Grammar of Discourse* (London, 1983) ch 2, and J. R. Hurford and B. Heasley, *Semantics* (CUP, 1983) 15.

<sup>11</sup> There is, for example, the remarkable 'wax and gold' literary genre of Ethiopia, the 'wax' representing the outward and generally innocuous form, and the 'gold' representing the hidden inner meaning. The 'gold' is concealed because it is potentially compromising. See D. N. Levine, *Wax and Gold* (University of Chicago Press, 1965).

<sup>12</sup> Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, New York, 1977. See also Peter Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics* (London, 1974): 'Conversations are structured, rule-governed, non-random sequences of utterances' (128). I prefer to speak of regularities rather than rules.

Venneman has termed a 'presupposition pool':<sup>13</sup> facts, beliefs, prejudices, even, that form the basis for the discourse. This is certainly an important principle in the case of the Nicodemus dialogue.

2. The principle of co-operation. Discourse cannot proceed unless each participant makes a positive attempt to further it. The constant injection of irrelevancies makes discourse intolerable: 'It's no use trying to talk sense to you'!

3. The principle of comprehensibility: the assumption that language will be used in its conventional manner. Humpty Dumpty may be allowed to define the word 'glory' as 'a nice knock-down argument'<sup>14</sup> but if he makes a habit of making such changes he will simply become incomprehensible.

4. The principle of contextual appropriateness: that all participants will correctly identify the context and will observe the appropriate social and linguistic conventions. An individual who addressed another individual as though he were addressing a crowd of a thousand people would be a serious embarrassment. Again, in the Nicodemus dialogue this is important.

5. The principle that vocabulary and linguistic structures exist to make the proposed discourse possible.

We note further that discourse proceeds by means of what are termed 'adjacency pairs':<sup>15</sup> paired utterances which allow for the orderly participation of the several members of a group engaged in discourse, and for the discourse to progress. The most obvious example of the adjacency pair is the formal greeting. Such pairs may display the formal markers of interrogation but are usually semantically neutral; 'How are you?' is not, in fact, a genuine enquiry after one's health, but a formal exploration of one's willingness to engage in dialogue.

Greetings pairs may be followed by QA, question-answer, pairs which may themselves introduce the substantive topic for the discourse, or may lead on to PR, proposition-response pairs which facilitate the dialogue proper.

Finally we note that all group interactions, and group discourse in particular, may powerfully be explicated in terms of dyadic interaction.<sup>16</sup> The individual in a group cannot, other than in a secondary and theoretical way, relate to the group, but relates instead to individual members of the group, gradually establishing and dissolving and reforming dyadic relationships as the discourse proceeds. Commonly the thrust of the conversation and the actual conduct of the group will be determined by a single dyad.

[p.66]

---

<sup>13</sup> T. Venneman, 'Topic, Sentence, Accent and Ellipsis' in E. L. Keenan (ed), *Formal Semantics of Natural Language* (CUP, 1975). The term 'presupposition pool' is to be preferred to G. Brown and G. Yule's 'topic framework', *Discourse Analysis* (CUP, 1983) 81-83.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted from E. D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (University of Chicago Press, 1976) 51-52, but most linguists find themselves quoting Humpty Dumpty eventually.

<sup>15</sup> Brown and Yule, *Discourse Analysis*, 230.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Douglas, *Groups* (London, 1983) 94-96.

## THE STRUCTURE OF 1:19-3:21

Behind the apparent simplicity of the Greek of John's gospel there lies a profundity of thought and a complexity of structure sufficient to fill the attention of any scholar for his lifetime. The task of identifying the structure is often made more difficult by the chapter divisions, and this is the case in the example before us.

The geographical transitions noted in 1:43, 'Jesus decided to go to Galilee', in 2:13, 'So Jesus went to Jerusalem' and in 3:22, 'After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside', objectively divide a lengthy stretch of text into its proper constituents, although this is most decidedly not to deny the relationship between those constituents. John 1:19-51 is placed in and around Bethany-near-the-Jordan; 2:1-12 is located at Cana and Capernaum; and 2:14-3:21 in Jerusalem.

It is important to notice, therefore, that the Nicodemus dialogue forms part of a sequence of events particularly including the sign of the cleansing of the temple and the response of the people to that sign, and must not be isolated within chapter three.

The purification of the temple by Jesus<sup>17</sup> is followed by a demand for a sign, an indication of his right to behave as he had done. Jesus' response is the enigmatic saying, 'Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.' (2:19). This is an undoubted dominical word, referred to again at Jesus' trial (Mt. 26:60), hurled at him in abuse when he was on the cross (Mt. 27:40) and possibly lying behind the charge that Jesus had threatened to destroy the temple (Acts 6:14).

It is, presumably, this sign, and other unspecified signs which Jesus was providing in and around Jerusalem (2:23) that produced some kind of faith-response in 'many people'. On the one hand this response is described in an orthodox manner as belief 'in his name', but on the other hand it is made clear that somehow that faith was inadequate: despite their belief, Jesus 'would not entrust himself to them'.

Towards the end of chapter two we are already being provided with information vital to the interpretation of chapter three: some people have believed in the name of Jesus, but their faith is inadequate. A further vital piece of information is given in the last verse of the chapter: Jesus 'did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man'. We shall quite miss the thrust of this pregnant saying if we refer it only to the inadequate faith of the crowds. It is equally important in explaining the conversation with Nicodemus.

## THE CHAPTER DIVISION

We are invited by John to set the faith of Nicodemus in contrast to the faith of the 'many people' of 2:23. The chapter division at the end of

[p.67]

---

<sup>17</sup> John records a cleansing of the temple near the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. The synoptists refer to one in Passion Week. Each of these cleansings is significantly associated with Passover, the festival which is markedly associated with formal holiness. The records of the two events differ in a number of important respects (the synoptists, for example, make no mention of a whip, but see Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (London, 1971) 188-191 for details) and there is no intrinsic improbability in the thought of the temple very rapidly reverting to its former market-status after the cleansing recorded by John.

2:25 makes that almost impossible. There are three objective reasons for abandoning that division.

First of all we note that in 3:2 John does not write 'He came to Jesus at night', but 'He came to *him* at night'. The antecedent for the pronominal *auton* is to be found in 2:24.

Second we note the description of Nicodemus as 'a man of the Pharisees'. Now we are familiar with numerous examples in the gospels of references to Pharisees, and Luke makes four references to individual Pharisees (7:36; 11:37; 14:1; 18:10). But the phrase *anthrōpos ek tōn Pharisaiōn* 'is as unusual in English as it is in Greek'.<sup>18</sup> The effect of the occurrence of *anthrōpos* in 3:1 ought to be to relate that *anthrōpos* to the two occurrences of the same word in 2:25. Indeed it is precisely this repetition of theme words that is one of the primary keys used in identifying discourse.

Third is the conjunction *de* in 3:1, ignored entirely by AV, NEB and GNB, and rendered blandly 'Now' by RSV and NIV. It is, of course, dangerous to make too much of the particle, which in the New Testament may often be no more than a stylistic copulative. But John is not prodigal in his use of *de*, and in view of the preceding discussion it seems entirely appropriate to allow to *de* its adversative force, 'However', contrasting the men of 2:25 with the man of 3:1.

## COMMENTARY

*3:1 Nicodemus* Robinson tentatively identifies three generations related to this Nicodemus, the *archōn*. Gorion b. Nicodemus is offered as the son, referred to by Josephus as accepting the surrender of the Roman garrison in Herod's palace AD 66. The grandson might then be Nicodemus b. Gorion who, according to the Talmud, offered, during the siege of Jerusalem, to supply the people with wheat and barley for the duration of the siege.<sup>19</sup> The dates fit well: Nicodemus must have been 50-60 years old in AD 28 if he was an *archōn*, and 38 years later his son would have been 60-70 years old, while 4 years later the grandson could have been 40-50 years old (having taken, following good custom, his respected grandfather's name).

*3:2 At night* Various reasons are offered for this mention of time: that Nicodemus was anxious to avoid being seen, or that John was simply weaving into the story a symbolic reference to the ignorance of Nicodemus, his need for light. However it is helpful to note that although John might have emphasized the time indication by 'fronting', removing *nyktos* from its 'normal' position to the front of the sentence, he has not done so. The mobility of the time indicator in the Greek sentence may be seen by reference to Acts 9:24-25 (sentence final), Matthew 28:13 (preceding the main verb), and Luke 21:37 (immediately

[p.68]

following adversative *de*.)<sup>20</sup> The fact that John does not emphasize *nyktos* supports the view that it is here no more than a chronological marker.

---

<sup>18</sup> Leon Morris, *ibid*, 209, n 2. In his Manson Memorial Lecture of 1970, M. de Jonge drew attention to the connection between chs 2 and 3 of the gospel indicated by the repetition of *anthrōpos*. *Nicodemus and Jesus: some Observations on Misunderstanding and Understanding in the Fourth Gospel* (Manchester, 1971).

<sup>19</sup> J. A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John* (London, 1985) 284-287.

<sup>20</sup> The mobility of the time indicator is, curiously, a feature of many languages. See M. Guthrie, *Bantu Sentence Structures* (London, 1961) 19, on his V Substitution Class, and my own 'The Amharic Primary Neutral Sentence', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* IV, 2 (July, 1966), 29-31. Brown and Yule comment: 'It is hard to make



It is interesting, moreover, to observe that, AV notwithstanding, John 7:50 does not reiterate the *nyktos* theme. However, John 19:38-39 brings together both the fact of a *nyktos* visit and the idea of secrecy, but the *nyktos* visit is ascribed to Nicodemus and the secrecy not to Nicodemus but to Joseph.

In fact the night-time conversation is best understood as an example of the known practice of the rabbis of using the quiet hours of early evening for serious theological discussion.<sup>21</sup>

Rabbi It is inconceivable that this was, in fact, the beginning of the conversation. There must have been the customary greetings-pairs, but we cannot expect that John would record them. He begins his record at the point where the discourse proper begins.

By addressing Jesus as 'rabbi' Nicodemus sets the level at which the conversation is to be conducted. The formal designation of the unconventional prophet from Galilee as 'rabbi' raises certain expectations which await confirmation in the succeeding dialogue. According to Westcott three levels of address are indicated by three noun forms, *rab*, *rabbi*, and *rabban*, this last the highest.<sup>22</sup> However, the use of *rabbi* does not definitely determine the relationship between Jesus and Nicodemus. Formally it certainly suggests respect, but there is some reason in the succeeding discourse for supposing that there might have been an element of sarcasm in Nicodemus' use of the term.

*oidamen*, 'we know' Nicodemus speaks on behalf of an undefined group of people. This *oidamen* has been taken to refer to one or other of four groups:

1. The *archontes*, the body of the Sanhedrin, of which Nicodemus was a member.
2. His own disciples, or, possibly, a representative group of rabbis who accompanied him.
3. *All* the people, with Nicodemus speaking on behalf of the masses.<sup>23</sup>
4. The *polloi* of 2:23.

Of these possibilities it must be said that the first is flatly contradicted by John 7:48, the Pharisees themselves commenting: 'Has any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? No!' The fourth option is ruled out if we accept the argument above that *de* is adversative; Nicodemus can scarcely be set in contrast to the crowd and at the same time be presented as their spokesman.

The second possibility, however, is very much more likely. It is *a priori* highly unlikely that a rabbi of the eminence of Nicodemus should have been walking about Jerusalem without his disciples. Thus Birger Gerhardsson notes the story of the two students who pursued their rabbi

[p.69]

---

judgements on the effects of different placings of adverbials in sentences in isolation. Some hearers feel these variations produce no difference in meaning, others perceive subtle nuances of difference'. *Discourse Analysis*, 133.

<sup>21</sup> See R. Schnackenberg, *The Gospel according to St. John* (London, 1968) 1, 366.

<sup>22</sup> *The Gospel of St. John* (London, 1892) 48.

<sup>23</sup> 'We all know', Bernard, *St. John* (Edinburgh, 1928) 1, 101.

even to his bedroom to ensure that they had shared in his total lifestyle.<sup>24</sup>

This observation opens up the entire question of the probable context of the encounter. It is commonly pictured as though Jesus were seated at home in the evening when there was a knock at the door and there was Nicodemus, all muffled up, who then slipped in to have an off-the-cuff discussion with Jesus. The scenario is implausible. For one thing it is most unlikely that Jesus was alone. Long ago Hengstenberg commented:

That Nicodemus came to Jesus by night does not necessarily imply that the disciples of Jesus... were not with him... Verse 11 seems to indicate distinctly the presence of disciples.<sup>25</sup>

But further, we have no evidence that at this point Jesus had access to a house in Jerusalem. Eventually he had a house available to him in Bethany, but it can be no more than conjecture that the house of Mary, John Mark's mother (Acts 12:12) would have been available to him at this time.

In fact we may more reasonably suppose that the conversation actually took place in Jerusalem, possibly in the Temple area, after night-fall, between Jesus, who was sitting there with a group of his disciples, and Nicodemus, who deliberately sought him there, with a group of *his* disciples. The *oidamen* of 3:2 and 3:11 are then given their natural significances.

But we have not finished with this *oidamen* yet. This opening statement by Nicodemus carries certain overtones. Plummer comments: 'There is a touch of Pharisaic complacency in the words: "Some of us are inclined to think well of you."' <sup>26</sup>

Westcott similarly comments:

The pronoun is not emphatic. There is, however, a symptom of latent presumption in the word. 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 had wrought.<sup>27</sup>

There is a certain irony emerging here. Nicodemus thinks that he has penetrated to an understanding of who and what Jesus is. His perception is inadequate. What Nicodemus does not know is that Jesus is entirely aware of that false estimate, and that Jesus for his part has (in accordance with 2:25) a total understanding of all that is going on in Nicodemus' mind. We shall return to this point below.

*a teacher* It is true that 'rabbi' collocates well with 'teacher' and that the word 'teacher' is lifted from its normal rather prosaic level to a higher level by the modifying 'sent from God', *apo theou*, itself marked by fronting. But John had been designated 'prophet' (Mk. 11:32) and Jesus was early similarly designated (Mk. 8:28). The use of *didaskalos* rather

[p.70]

than *prophētēs* suggests a relatively conservative estimate of Jesus by Nicodemus.

---

<sup>24</sup> *The Origins of the Gospel Traditions* (London, 1979) 17-18.

<sup>25</sup> *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John* (Edinburgh, 1971) 158, first published in 1871.

<sup>26</sup> *Gospel according to St. John, ad loc.*

<sup>27</sup> *Gospel of St. John*, 48.

*the miraculous signs* The ground for identifying Jesus as a teacher from God, despite his admitted lack of education, (cf 7:15) is to be found in his signs. Considered merely as a text the appearance of *tauta* at this point represents a difficulty. There is no explanation of these *sēmeia*, although 2:23 makes reference to unspecified miraculous signs which Jesus was performing in Jerusalem, but which John has not thought fit to include in his record. If, however, within the context of the actual discourse, we choose to ask Nicodemus, 'Which signs?', Nicodemus would respond with an expressive wave of the hand, 'These signs, the signs which Jesus has recently been showing.' The very imprecision at this point is further indication that we have here a genuine fragment of a conversation, and not an artificially contrived piece of fiction. It is a real fragment of a real conversation and John is not prepared to gloss it unnecessarily.

*3:3 In reply* We must pause here to consider what has been happening. The two rabbis have met and exchanged their greetings. Eventually it was time for one or the other to establish the substantive topic of conversation. In every society there are conventions regarding the right to take this important step. In most societies it is the privilege of the senior to move the conversation on, to offer topic. Now in the case of rabbinic Judaism we know that it was normal for the senior to speak before the junior, precisely because this normal priority was reversed in the abnormal context of a capital trial.<sup>28</sup>

It is on the basis of an assumed superiority, therefore, that Nicodemus has offered topic for further conversation. In fact, as commonly happens, he offers several possible topics: the concept of 'rabbi', the implication of recognizing Jesus as a teacher, the significance of the qualifying *apo theou*, the significance and the provenance of *sēmeia*. But Jesus accepts none of them. Had he done so he would have accepted also Nicodemus' assumption of priority. Jesus takes up none of Nicodemus' topics.

There is no way in which what Jesus says to Nicodemus can be construed as a continuation of themes proposed by Nicodemus. This vital point is never really dealt with by commentators if, indeed, it is even recognised. Thus C. K. Barrett, in spite of a lengthy note on verse three, makes no comment at all on the appropriateness of Jesus' response.

What we have here is what is termed *complex repartee*.<sup>29</sup> The effect of the *non-sequitur* in Jesus' response is to throw back onto Nicodemus an important decision: shall he continue the conversation on the new terms inherent in Jesus' response? For what Jesus has done is to reject Nicodemus' assumption of superior status and the right, therefore, to indicate topic. Instead he asserts his own right to the superior status.

[p.71]

The situation is complex but can be readily stated:

Nicodemus thinks that he (the speaker, S) is the superior.

Nicodemus thinks that Jesus (the hearer, H) also shares in this belief.

---

<sup>28</sup> *Sanhedrin* 4:1.

<sup>29</sup> Longacre, *Grammar of Discourse*, 51-53, comments on the situation arising when a speaker's lead is rejected: 'When this happens the first speaker is himself faced with a decision as to whether he will accept the dialogue on the new terms suggested by the second speaker.' See particularly the treatment of the problem by S. Mendner in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 77 (1958), 293-323. Unable to make sense of the dialogue as it stands Mendner proceeds by dismissing parts of the text from the dialogue.

Jesus does not share in that belief.  
Jesus knows that Nicodemus has the belief.  
This may be represented schematically as follows:

Speaker has the belief.	S+
Hearer does not.	H-
Speaker thinks that hearer has it.	SH+
Hearer knows that the speaker has it.	HS+

This last point goes back to 2:25 and the statement that Jesus knew what was in man, knew his thoughts. He knows the thoughts of Nicodemus. By contrast, however, Nicodemus does not know the thoughts of Jesus.

Nicodemus now faces a dilemma. Can he accept the conversation on the new terms *bearing in mind the fact that he has his disciples with him*? For it is surely absurd to think that any member of the Sanhedrin, any Pharisee, in particular one who has the reputation of being the teacher of Israel, should yield precedence to the eccentric peripatetic teacher from Galilee.

The diminishing contributions from Nicodemus (from 28 words, to 24 words, to 4 words, to zero in response to Jesus' question in v 10) signal not the disappearance from a mythical conversation of a figure who was no longer required, but the petulant response of a rabbi who refuses to co-operate in furthering the conversation on the terms offered.

We have already seen above that discourse proceeds in accordance with five principles, the second of which is the principle of co-operation. It is suggested that Nicodemus is refusing to observe this principle.

*unless a man is born again* Jesus now offers at least two topics to Nicodemus: being born again and the kingdom of God. At this point we must introduce the concept of the presupposition pool.<sup>30</sup> We have already noted five principles which underlie discourse, the first principle being knowledge of the other participants. This knowledge provides the presupposition pool, the pool of knowledge shared by all the participants, on the basis of which each speaker supplies information not already in the pool, or withholds information believed to be in the pool already.

Thus when, without further qualification, Jesus makes reference to being born again it is because he knows (and really does know) that Nicodemus already has knowledge of the subject sufficient to enable him to carry the discourse further.

It is worth commenting here that, although Greek *anōthen* is

[p.72]

ambiguous, the original conversation must have taken place in Aramaic, and no such ambiguity would have been present. The statement by Jesus said, quite clearly, 'born again' and that was how Nicodemus would have heard it. He would not have had the doubts expressed by some commentators as to whether Jesus was referring to being born 'again' or being born 'from above'.

---

<sup>30</sup> See n 13, above.

Nicodemus could have understood this statement by Jesus had he wished to. He could have understood out of his own awareness of the significance of proselyte baptism. To quote R. E. Brown:

Jewish proselyte baptism could have come to his mind, a custom wherein the baptised proselyte was compared to a new-born child (the custom of proselyte baptism seems to have taken hold in Judaism some time in the first century AD).<sup>31</sup>

In fact we can go further: the practice certainly existed in the lifetime of the temple, since circumcision, *sacrifice*, and baptism were the three essential conditions to be fulfilled by the proselyte.<sup>32</sup>

*3:4 How...?* The response by Nicodemus lacks any of the subtlety to be expected of a learned rabbi engaged in theological debate. It is the flat response of the amateur, or else it is the uncooperative response of a professional whose pride has been touched.

*3:5 born of water* Jesus now gives to Nicodemus the clue to the meaning of what he was saying by referring to water. There could now, surely, be no excuse for failing to perceive what Jesus was referring to. And even if his own practice of the baptism of gentiles did not at once occur to him, the example of John, baptizing Jews, must have done. Godet perceptively commented:

John's baptism was at that very moment producing so profound a sensation in Israel that the first thought of Nicodemus on hearing the phrase 'born of water' could not fail to turn to that ceremony.<sup>33</sup>

Very, far from teaching baptismal regeneration, a doctrine which Nicodemus would almost certainly have recognized, this statement by Jesus emphatically denies such a doctrine. Nicodemus might well have thought that being born of water was enough; Jesus insists that it is not: one must be born of water and of the Spirit. And in the following breath Jesus goes on to explain the logic for such an insistence: flesh is flesh and flesh can only generate flesh. Spiritual life can come only from the Spirit.

*3:7 You should not be surprised* The 'you' is singular: Jesus is directly addressing Nicodemus, and there is an ironical touch in what he says. Nicodemus, the great teacher, surprised by such elementary doctrine! The logic is simple: the consequence clear... why, then, should Nicodemus express surprise? *Still* Jesus is totally aware of all that is passing through the mind of Nicodemus, he follows perfectly the

[p.73]

tortuous thinking of a man whose theology is being profoundly disturbed... and by a Galilean preacher.

*You must all be born again* The 'you' now is plural. And Jesus is no longer addressing only Nicodemus. His words now embrace everyone else: Nicodemus, his disciples and the disciples of Jesus. They must *all* be born again.

---

<sup>31</sup> *Gospel according to St. John*, 2, 142.

<sup>32</sup> R. J. Z. Werblowski, 'A Note on Purification and Proselyte Baptism', in J. Neusner (ed), *Christianity, Judaism and other Graeco-Roman cults* 3 (Leiden, 1975) and *Yebamoth* 47a, b; *Gerim* 7:8.

<sup>33</sup> *Commentary on St. John's Gospel* (Edinburgh, 1889) 2, 49.

*3:9 How...?* The four words in Greek might well represent a single word in the Aramaic of the original conversation. Once again it appears that Nicodemus refuses actively to further the dialogue.

*3:10 Are you Israel's teacher?* Literally 'the teacher...' The irony is apparent once more: is it conceivable that Nicodemus could fail to understand the almost elementary teaching offered by Jesus?

*do you not understand these things?* It is, of course, possible that the question is entirely rhetorical. But there is nothing to prevent our assuming a pause after the question, giving Nicodemus the opportunity of expressing the reason for his inability to understand what is being said. In the event there is no response to the question, and Jesus continues.

*3:11 I tell you the truth* The double *amēn* represents a solemn introduction to the climax of the conversation.

The succeeding sentences fall into three groups. The first (v 11) is in the first person plural, referring to the testimony of Jesus and his followers. The second (v 12) is in the first person singular and refers to the specific testimony of Jesus himself. The third (vv 13-15) is in an impersonal form, Jesus making an oblique identification of himself as 'Son of Man'.

*We speak of what we know* There appears to be a deliberate echoing of what Nicodemus had said patronisingly at the beginning of the conversation: *oidamen*, 'we know'. Jesus responds: 'And there are things that we know, as well'! And yet 'you people', you (plural), do not accept that testimony. Notice that this verse confirms the suggestion that both of the principals in the dialogue are accompanied by their disciples, although it must be admitted that both the 'we know' and the 'you people' could refer to groups not specifically identified and not actually present.

*3:12 I have spoken to you of earthly things* It is difficult, but not impossible,<sup>34</sup> to reconcile this statement with what has taken place in the dialogue thus far. It is only by courtesy that we can describe any part of the dialogue so far as dealing with *earthly things*.

But, Leon Morris notwithstanding,<sup>35</sup> it is more natural to refer these words to a previous encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. Not, obviously, an encounter in any way parallel to this encounter, but it seems entirely possible that Nicodemus and his disciples had at some point already heard Jesus preaching in Jerusalem, and, indeed, that it was precisely such an encounter that had led to his coming to Jesus, formally, on the present occasion.

[p.74]

It is not the intention of this paper to cover the exegesis of themes already adequately dealt with in the commentaries. It appears to me that the record of the conversation ends at 3:15, and the remainder of the chapter represents editorial comment. Jesus not infrequently referred to himself as Son of Man, and we may, therefore, assign verses 13-15 to him. But the first person disappears from verse 16 onwards and this would suggest the end of dialogue and the beginning of editorial comment.

---

<sup>34</sup> See R. E. Brown's comments *ad loc.*

<sup>35</sup> *Gospel according to John*, 222.

## CONCLUSION

This entirely fresh treatment of the Johannine record of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus leads to rather different conclusions from those reached by other methods. Of course it is always true that conclusions are in some measure determined by presuppositions, in this case the presupposition that we take John's record of this dialogue as being a real but fragmentary account of a genuine encounter.

The application of the insights particularly of sociolinguistics then enables us to re-create the original context from the fragmented context and to give to all of the evidence made available in the text meaning which is consistent with discourse theory. Some apparent inconsistencies and ambiguities which require special explanation on alternative theories (in particular the meaning of *anōthen*, the reference to *sēmeia*, the significance of *oidamen* and the gradual eclipse of Nicodemus) take their natural place in the unfolding discourse. The strange inconsistency between the opening words of Nicodemus and the response of Jesus takes on a completely new significance.

And out of this fresh analysis there emerges a new and entirely believable portrait of Nicodemus. He has been introduced to us so as to be contrasted with the crowds whose belief was seen to be defective. His apparent social superiority is brought into question as is his apparent intellectual superiority. Humbled, and perhaps in measure shamed by the encounter, Nicodemus retreats into silence.

Of course the interview itself did not end with Jesus' statement in 3:15. The conversation must have continued, but the record of that conversation does not. What John *does* do for us is to show the unfolding commitment of Nicodemus to Jesus through his two further appearances. In 7:48 we have the delicious irony of the scornful rhetorical question of the Pharisees: 'Has any of the rulers (*archontōn!*) or of the Pharisees believed in him?', of itself, apparently, sufficient to cause Nicodemus to spring to the defence of Jesus. And finally we encounter Nicodemus at the cross, in 19:38-42, openly and unashamedly allied to Jesus. When the faith of the crowds had been shown to be inadequate, when everyone else had left, then... 'there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus'.

---

© 1986 *London School of Theology* (<http://www.lst.ac.uk/>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in March 2009 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---