

Meeting Nicodemus: A Case Study in Daring Theological Interpretation

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Abstract

The Nicodemus story can be read as a distillation of the Gospel of John and an example of many of its key features. John 3:1–21 poses a wide range of the problems raised by this most distinctive and mysterious of the four gospels. It shows characteristic practices of John as a reader, writer and teacher. In line with John's theology of the Spirit 'leading into all the truth', it also shows him as a daring theologian, opening up fresh interpretations and ways of doing theology beyond the Septuagint and the Synoptic Gospels and even beyond his own Prologue (itself a remarkably daring piece of theology). That same Spirit means that John also expects his readers to be led into further truth, and to improvise on his theology as he himself did on the Septuagint and on the Synoptic traditions. His ways of reading, writing and teaching encourage such a response in the Spirit by creating a work rich in intertextuality, imagery and conceptuality which has a 'deep plain sense', superabundant in meaning and always inviting the reader to reread, learn more and interpret afresh. So one challenge for readers now is whether they are open not only to thinking along with John but also to thinking beyond him, in ways appropriate to different people and contexts. But this transformation in thought and imagination is not all: it is inseparable from doing the truth 'in God'. The mutual involvement of seeing, believing/trusting, knowing and living in love is above all communicated in the drama of John's Gospel, whose backbone is a series of meetings with Jesus and the injunction to follow Jesus. More embracing and fundamental than, for example, doctrinal theology or existential decision-making, is the dramatic reality of encountering other people and following Jesus in all the complexities of life in specific contexts. In John 3:1–21 the encounter of Jesus with Nicodemus is the dramatic heart of the passage, blending into a discourse which itself culminates in the ultimate drama of 'deeds done in God'. But to stop interpretation there would be to refuse the Johannine invitation to enter into more truth with a view to 'doing greater things'. So the article ends with two midrashic interpretations of Nicodemus for today.

Keywords: drama, intertextuality, plain sense, Spirit, theological interpretation, theological reader.

The Gospel of John is in many ways the most distinctive and mysterious of the four canonical Gospels. There is no agreement among scholars today about who wrote it, when or in what stages it was written, for whom it was written, how it relates to the other Gospels or to other writings (including the three letters of John) within and beyond the New Testament, what the main influences upon it were, how it was first received among Christians, how historically reliable it is or much else. Nor is there agreement among Christian theologians and other readers, past or present, how it should best be understood and applied. Yet it has been and continues to be one of the most influential writings in Christian history, and every generation of Christians and scholars has to engage with it afresh. Beyond the Christian Church and the academy it also carries significance – for example, it figures in many cultures and their artistic, musical and literary artefacts, and for both Jews and Muslims it is, perhaps, the single most problematic text in the New Testament.

This article proposes that the account of Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus is in several respects an ideal test case for the theological interpretation of the Gospel, raising many of the most important and fascinating questions, and in particular challenging today's Christian theologians to measure up to John's theology. Along with many commentators I am taking as the unit of interpretation John 3:1–21,¹ though arguments can be made for beginning the unit at 2:23² and for including in it 3:31–6,³ and the actual dialogue with Nicodemus merges into a discourse without a clear division between the two.

John as theological reader

John is a reader who writes so as to teach his readers how to read not only his own Gospel but also the Synoptic Gospels⁴ and the Hebrew Scriptures, especially as the latter are known through the Septuagint, their Greek

¹ The trans. used is the New Revised Standard Version, but in some cases following clarifications or alternatives suggested by others, in particular John F. McHugh, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on John 1–4*, ed. Graham Stanton (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2009), pp. 217–18.

² E.g. McHugh, *Commentary on John 1–4*, pp. 217–18; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), pp. 130ff.; Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), pp. 80ff. Many agree that it is a transitional passage which could go either with what precedes or follows it.

³ E.g. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John*, trans. Kevin Smyth, et al., 3 vols (London: Burns & Oates, 1968, 1980, 1982), vol. 1, pp. 360ff.

⁴ The question of John's knowledge of the Synoptic Gospels or of the traditions they knew is highly disputed but important for my argument. I agree with those who see John constantly assuming and alluding to the Synoptics, or at least to the traditions

translation.⁵ The Septuagint is frequently referred to directly but far more frequently alluded to, and this is exemplified in the Nicodemus passage.

The obvious direct reference is to Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness (3:14–15, referring to Numbers 21:8–9), and this represents a typical piece of Johannine theological interpretation and a way into some key features of his theological method. There is no New Testament parallel to this reference to Numbers 21, so it seems as if it is John's original interpretation.⁶ The typological reading of Numbers introduces for the first time his distinctive theme of the lifting up of Jesus on the cross and the associated theology of Jesus' death as his glorification. This moves beyond other New Testament conceptions of the cross as humiliation and the resurrection/ascension as exaltation to see the cross itself as exaltation and glorification – what Schnackenburg calls 'a most important step in Christology'.⁷

But its intertextuality is not just with Numbers. There are also allusions to other parts of the Septuagint and to the Synoptics. The verb 'lift up' (ὑψώω) is not used in the Greek translation of Numbers, but is a common word elsewhere in the Septuagint.⁸ Of special interest is its use in Isaiah 52:13 about the 'suffering servant': 'My servant (παῖς, which also means child) will be exalted (ὑψωθήσεται) and greatly glorified (δοξασθήσεται)'. Here exaltation and glory are brought together in relation to a suffering servant of God, in the context of a passage with many Greek words also used by John.⁹

the Synoptics drew upon. Cf. Edwyn Clement Hoskyns and Francis Noel Davey, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1947); C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd edn (London: SPCK, 1978); A. Deneux (ed.), *John and the Synoptics* (Louvain: Louvain University Press, 1992); and Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 26–39. I find the latter the most convincing short summary of the debate, emphasising John's 'creativity' in drawing on his sources.

⁵ This is the one text we do know John read, and the most secure conclusions about John as reader are likely to be drawn from his uses of the Septuagint. On this see especially Barrett, *Gospel According to St John*, pp. 27ff.; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 2 vols (New York: Doubleday, 1966, 1970), introduction to vol. 1, where the range of influences on John is well outlined; cf. also M. J. J. Menken, *Old Testament Quotations in the Fourth Gospel* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996); Susan Hynlen, *Allusion and Meaning in John 6* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005).

⁶ E.g. Schnackenburg, *Gospel According to St John*, vol. 1, p. 395 on 3:14: 'it is probably derived from the evangelist's own theological reflection'.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

⁸ As McHugh, *Commentary on John 1–4*, notes, the verb ὑψώω 'occurs around 260 times, mostly in religious contexts, meaning to exalt, to glorify, to save and even to redeem' (p. 235).

⁹ E.g. δόξα, ἔθνη, πιστεύω, ἁμαρτία, εἰρήνη, πρόβατον, κύριος, ἄμνος, κρίσις, ζωή, ἀνομία, φῶς (LXX Isaiah 52:13–53:12). It is repeatedly the case that if one

The Numbers text itself is interpreted in Wisdom 16:5–7, which stresses that being healed or saved did not happen just because of looking at the serpent but through God ‘the saviour of all’. This goes well with John’s emphasis on the initiative of God and the response of faith in 3:16.

As regards the Synoptics, the most obvious resonance is in the ‘must’ (δεῖ) of 3:14. It is used by Matthew (16:21), Mark (8:31) and Luke (9:22) in predictions of the passion and death of Jesus as ‘Son of Man’,¹⁰ suggesting that it is the will of God, and the same suggestion is made by John – but, as McHugh says, expressing ‘his own theology of the cross’.¹¹ Perhaps the most significant point to be made about the relation of 3:14–15 to the Synoptics is that here, for the first of seventeen times, the term ‘eternal life’ is used by John. Earlier in the chapter, ‘Kingdom of God’ is used twice, 3:5 being the last time it occurs in John. It is as if John takes a phrase central to the teaching of Jesus in the Synoptics and in this passage gently substitutes for it his own favourite phrase (which is also in the Synoptics,¹² but far less prominent). It brings about a shift in associations: from rule and power to ‘family’ life as children of God, or the love of friends; from imminence or inauguration to long-term ‘dwelling’ and mutual indwelling, with a greater emphasis on realised eschatology and an absence of apocalyptic expectation and drama; and from one set of Septuagint associations to another.

In these two densely intertextual verses,¹³ John offers a new typological interpretation of Numbers and introduces a fresh conception of the death of Jesus as a lifting up, which later chapters will develop further; he connects with the Synoptics while giving a distinctively different theology; he carries out a significant shift in core terminology from ‘kingdom of God’ to ‘eternal life’; and he models a way of reading which seeks out more and more resonances with scripture and tradition, and so invites continual rereading.

follows John’s references and allusions back to the Septuagint, by reading them in context yet further implications of his meaning can be surmised. E.g. in Numbers 21:8–9 the key Johannine term ‘sign’ (σημεῖον) is used twice – on this see Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), vol. 1, p. 565.

¹⁰ On Jesus as Son of Man in John, see McHugh, *Commentary on John* 1–4, p. 236.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

¹² Cf. especially Matt 19:16.

¹³ I have only mentioned the most obvious of their many intertextual resonances – other key terms such as Moses, serpent, wilderness, Son of Man and believing could yield many more within the Septuagint, the Synoptics and the Johannine literature, let alone echoes in non-scriptural literature. Keener, *Gospel of John*, is especially thorough in tracing such resonances throughout relevant ancient literature – on 3:14–15, see vol. 1, pp. 563ff. The intertextuality of the whole of 3:1–21 could occupy several books (cf. below on the resonance between 3:9 and Luke 1:34).

This is not an approach to texts that sees them as having fixed, summarisable, literal messages. Literal, plain sense messages may, of course, be given ('a Pharisee named Nicodemus'), but there is also what might be called the 'deep plain sense'.¹⁴ Because the text concerns God, and everything and everyone else in relation to God, this deepening (and, indeed, broadening) is in principle endlessly open, and intertextuality is one way to explore it.

Perhaps of most theological significance, these two verses also contain a characteristic Johannine theological move which has implications far beyond the way John reads other texts and might be seen as a charter for doing daring theology analogous to John's. This is the 'as . . . so . . .' pattern seen in v. 14: 'And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up . . .' Here two complex events – Moses lifting up the serpent and Jesus dying on the cross (each with a limitless context: in Moses' case, the Exodus story with the naming of God as 'I am', the rest of the Pentateuch, later interpretations as in Wisdom of Solomon and so on; in Jesus' case, as already laid out in the Prologue, the context is nothing less than God and all created reality) – are compared with each other, but readers are left to work out most of the meaning for themselves.

The 'as . . . so . . .' thinking in John recurs at key points, each time inviting readers to think for themselves about hugely important yet open statements which require an enlargement of their minds, imaginations and practical engagements.¹⁵ In the Farewell Discourses the 'as . . . so . . .' thinking is even more prominent, encouraging further the intensive interrelation of the Father, the Son and believers, with a fresh dimension of ongoing ethical living: 'So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you' (13:14–15). The verses encourage further improvisations in thought, imagination and practice, in line with their rich symbolism and the invitation, implied by 'as I have done', to reflect continually afresh on just what Jesus has done. The ethical and cognitive implications, potentially reaching 'everyone', are made explicit around the 'new commandment': 'Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another' (13:34). This ethos is then grounded within the love of Father and Son: 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love'

¹⁴ I call it 'deep plain sense' to distinguish it from e.g. the sort of midrashic interpretations with which this article concludes – they may be deep and may relate variously to the plain sense of varying depths, but they do not claim to be plain or literal. For a theological discussion of 'plain sense' see K. E. Greene-McCreight, *Ad Litteram: How Augustine, Calvin, and Barth Read the 'Plain Sense' of Genesis 1–3* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).

¹⁵ E.g. 5:26, 6:57 and 10:14–15 give scope for endless meditation, together with epistemological and theological reflection and argument.

(15:9). This ‘as’ is the most comprehensive of all, reaching back to 1:18 – ‘God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart [or in the bosom of the Father]’ – and forwards to 17:21–3, 26, with its climactic ‘as . . . so . . .’ series:

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me . . . so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

The final example is at the breathing of the Holy Spirit into the disciples, as the resurrected Jesus gives them their mission: ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you’ (20:21). This verse, as the inspiration for a theology of engagement with the world in the Spirit, invites continual reflection¹⁶ upon all that is said in the Gospel about the sending of Jesus, perhaps most richly in 3:16.¹⁷

The ‘as . . . so . . .’ pattern, especially if seen in close connection with the ‘I am’ sayings,¹⁸ is perhaps the most comprehensive way John has of eliciting from his readers the sort of meditatively daring theology he himself models. It is a limit case of John as theological reader. He reads Numbers, Exodus, Isaiah or other parts of the Septuagint together with the testimonies to Jesus in the Synoptics and other traditions, and invites the reader to read them and him, guided by the Spirit, in analogously deep, theological and practical ways. But he also has other means of drawing readers into doing theology his way.

¹⁶ As suggested by 16:13–14: ‘When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth . . . he will take what is mine and declare it to you’.

¹⁷ The giving by God is equated to sending in the next verse, 3:17.

¹⁸ The ‘I am’ statements with a predicate, such as ‘I am the good shepherd’ in 10:11, 14, might be seen as another form of the ‘as . . . so . . .’ pattern, e.g. in: ‘As a good shepherd takes care of sheep so I take care of you’. Those without a predicate, e.g. 8:48 ‘Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am”’, might be seen as the limit case of the ontological claim of the Johannine Jesus: ‘As God is, so am I’. For illuminating reflections on ‘as’ in relation to metaphor and the verb ‘to be’ see Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), last chapter and, for its working out in exegesis of Exodus 3:14 and the philosophical and theological interpretation of that verse down the centuries, see Paul Ricoeur and André LaCocque, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 305–64.

John as theological writer

As a writer¹⁹ John uses an array of literary means which ensure that his text is underdetermined, open to ruminations and wrestlings which stretch the reader's mind, heart and imagination.²⁰ I side with the many recent commentators on John who see him as a master craftsman, whose text is always worth examining very closely as literature.²¹ The Nicodemus story shows many of his favourite techniques.

There is irony – Nicodemus, coming by night to the 'light of the world', the teacher who claims to know but is mystified and mistaken; or the broader irony of juxtaposing this chapter with the following one, in which a completely contrasting person, an anonymous, marginalised, Samaritan woman, whom Jesus happens upon at a well, grasps who he is and what he means far better than the distinguished, named, male, Pharisee and Jewish leader who deliberately seeks Jesus out and calls him Rabbi. One effect of discovering any irony is to alert one to the possibility of finding it elsewhere and to encourage rereading to see if one has missed cues of further meaning. In an article which perceptively brings together literary criticism and sociological interpretation, Trond Dokka has pointed to the wider significance, in line with my argument in this article, of Johannine irony: 'There appears in the Johannine universe to be a surplus of meaning, meaning which is not lexicalized in any earthly language. And this, on Johannine terms, is to be regarded as constitutive.'²²

¹⁹ John as writer also includes John as reader, only available through his writing.

²⁰ The indeterminacy of language is, of course, a feature of all literature: John intensifies it in the ways described.

²¹ See e.g. Brodie, *Gospel According to John*; R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998); J. Frey, J. van der Watt and R. Zimmermann, *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, Forms, Themes and Theology of Johannine Figurative Language* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006); Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John, Sacra Pagina Series, 4* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998); Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992); Johannes Nissen and Sigfred Pedersen (eds), *New Readings in John: Literary and Theological Perspectives* (London: T&T Clark, 2004); Fernando F. Segovia, 'What is John?', vol. 2, *Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998); G. Van Belle, M. Labahn and P. Maritz, *Repetitions in the Fourth Gospel: Style, Text, Interpretation* (Leuven: Peeters, 2009).

²² Trond Dokka, 'Irony and Sectarianism in the Gospel of John', in Nissen and Pedersen (eds), *New Readings*, p. 103. Dokka's remarkable article makes some provocative suggestions, including his 'guess . . . that the price to be paid for the openness of the text, for its ability to initiate outsiders, has been to destabilize and confuse every inner circle as soon as established' (p. 106). He concludes with a tantalising reference to the 'as . . . so . . .' pattern (p. 107).

There are puns and word-play, as with 'born from above'/'born afresh, anew, again', 'wind'/'spirit', 'sound'/voice. Again, one effect is to interrupt any simple confidence in having grasped the meaning, to encourage a reader to do double, triple and more 'takes', and to be open to the possibility that there is no single sense.

There is rich, open imagery, often elemental, of birth, water, wind, darkness and light, above and below, earth and heaven. This is almost infinitely rich and potentially yields fresh content and associations at every reading.²³ It therefore generates a huge variety of interpretations. Below, I will explore further that of wind/spirit.

Besides the intertextuality already explored in relation to 3:14–15,²⁴ there is also the intratextuality within John. The Gospel abounds in internal connections, allusions and resonances which often only become apparent after many readings. Nicodemus himself appears twice more in the Gospel (see below), and 3:1–21 has many instances of rich Johannine terminology and themes which require the context of the rest of the Gospel to be adequately understood.²⁵

These are just some of the most obvious literary features²⁶ which together not only reveal the superabundant meaning of this text but also invite the reader into active theological meditation, exploration and improvisation. One way of understanding them is as the techniques of a superb teacher, opening up learners to more and more, and inspiring them to mature by becoming theologians who do not just repeat what their teacher says but are encouraged to attempt the sort of daring and profound theology which he himself exemplifies. Teaching is one of the themes of 3:1–21, with Nicodemus calling Jesus 'Rabbi' and Jesus asking him: 'Are you a [or the] teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?' How, then, does the whole passage teach?

²³ See Dokka, 'Irony and Sectarianism', on this. Transposed into the 'as . . . so . . .' pattern, key imagery can be expressed in the form, e.g.: 'As birth . . . so seeing/entering the Kingdom of God . . .', or 'As wind . . . so the one born of the Spirit . . .'.

²⁴ That was just a taste of what can be discovered in 3:1–21 – the commentators offer dozens more examples, with fresh suggestions continually being made. One of my favourites, suggested by Lucy Gardener while we were studying the text together, is the resonance between 3:9 and Luke 1:34. Like the Nicodemus passage, the annunciation to Mary includes perplexity, birth from above, the Holy Spirit, knowing (the same verb, γινώσκω) and questioning how this can be possible.

²⁵ E.g. signs, know, water, Spirit, God, flesh, earthly, heavenly, testify, believe, Son of Man, love, world, only Son, send, condemn, save, Son of God, judgement, light, darkness, evil, doing the truth.

²⁶ For John's use of dramatic narrative and characterisation, see below.

John as theological teacher: waves of meaning

The Gospel of John can be read as pedagogy intending ‘that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name’ (20:31). Besides the points already made,²⁷ I want to comment on a feature of John’s pedagogical technique which underlines the importance of rereading for further meaning: he communicates his main points by repetition with additive variation. It is like waves on a beach, as one goes up so far, then ceases, to be followed by another which covers the same ground but goes a little further. The last wave is usually the one to watch especially: it finally reaches the key point. In 3:1–21 John helpfully distinguishes each wave by headlining it with the mark of special teaching authority in both John and the Synoptics, ‘Very truly, I tell you’ (ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι – vv. 3, 5, 11). As so often with John, the openness of his text can legitimately generate many ‘deep plain sense’ interpretations. Here I offer just one, christological, way into 3:1–21, without excluding others.

The first wave: born from above

The first, short wave of teaching begins with Jesus’ first response to Nicodemus: ‘No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above’ (v. 3). This is usually taken as a general statement, and that is how Nicodemus takes it. But Nicodemus has just said Jesus was ‘from God’ (v. 2) and Jesus may well be agreeing with him, referring to himself as indeed from God, born from above – later he says ‘No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man’ (v. 13).²⁸ So at present he is the only one born from above, and the teaching (which understandably Nicodemus has difficulty with because at present there is only one example) is about how his whole mission is to share this birth from above with others. In this passage the new reality is also known as the kingdom of God, the Holy Spirit, eternal life, God’s love for the world, or light. Nicodemus has difficulty with it as a general statement about literal birth, and that elicits a second, longer wave of teaching by Jesus (vv. 5–9).

The second wave: born of water and Spirit

In this wave, Jesus speaks of needing to be ‘born of water and Spirit’. I will pass over the interesting discussions of whether this refers to baptism. I propose two points.

²⁷ Just as the remarks about John as reader are also part of John as writer, so both sets of remarks can be taken up into what follows on John as teacher.

²⁸ I owe this reading to Lucy Gardner, in joint study.

First, water and Spirit can, again, be general but also can refer to the human and divine origin of Jesus, water being connected with natural birth. This is reinforced by the next verse with its mention of flesh and Spirit, as in John 1 where these two terms are focused on Jesus: he is the Word become flesh – 1:14; and John (the Baptist) says: ‘I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him’ (1:32).

Second, the culmination of this wave in v. 8 is solely focused on the Spirit: ‘The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ Here, I suggest, is the main point of this wave, but what might it mean? The mysterious origin and destiny of Jesus, the one on whom the Spirit remains, is a theme in John, so here again Jesus makes sense as the first referent, who enables the giving of the Spirit to others. And note ‘you hear the sound of it’. ‘Sound’ (φωνή) is also ‘voice’, and the voice of Jesus is vital to this Gospel (the same Greek words are used in the parables of the sheepfold and the shepherd, with reference to hearing Jesus’ voice – see 10:1–18, especially vv. 3 and 16 for ‘hear’ and ‘voice’). The ultimate origin and destiny of the Spirit and of those who are born of the Spirit, beginning with Jesus, is God, heaven, ‘above’.

But what does the Spirit mean in John? From chapter 1 where the Spirit rests on and remains with Jesus, through to Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit on his disciples in chapter 20, this is the Gospel most pervasively concerned with the Spirit. Each mention deserves discussion, but discourse about the Spirit is most expansive in the Farewell Discourses (chs 13–17), and – within them – climaxes in 16:13a: ‘When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth . . .’ What might the implications of that promise be for John and for theological interpretation now?

For John, who must have believed himself to have received the Holy Spirit and therefore to be one in whom that promise was being fulfilled, it means that he trusted that there was more and more truth into which to enter. Theologically, his Gospel can be read as the result of being led further into that truth by the Holy Spirit. In other words, he was not content simply to record words and deeds of Jesus. Here I bracket out the hugely complicated and important debate about the historicity of this Gospel. Most would agree that at the very least its accounts are rooted not only in eyewitness testimony but also in many years of mature reflection on such testimony. But just to take the Prologue (1:1–18): it is not ascribed to Jesus but is instead presented by the evangelist as a fundamental statement about God, Jesus Christ and the whole of reality, and it is as radical and daring a piece of theology as has ever been written. It is probably the single most influential short theological

statement in the history of Christian thought and, as far as we know, it says some things which had not previously been said.²⁹

If John's own practice is to be followed, John 16:13a means that in contemporary theological interpretation one does not take what John writes as the last word. One must be willing to do as he did, and be led further and further. In the Prologue, for example, he offers a new interpretation of Genesis 1 and of God through his understanding of Jesus Christ, and he uses the key term *logos*, shared by the Septuagint and Greek-speaking culture, ethics, politics, philosophy and science. He opened the way for centuries of conflictual and creative wrestling about how the Hebraic and Hellenic dimensions of Christianity should relate to each other, and helped to inspire similar intellectual and imaginative wrestling whenever Christianity has come in contact with another culture, civilisation or science. John's insistence that the Word made flesh is inseparable from 'all things', 'all people' and 'all truth' sets an inexhaustible agenda for Christian thinkers, scientists, artists and others who want to make discerning and true connections between Jesus Christ and the contemporary world.

What about the Spirit blowing 'where it chooses' and people not knowing 'where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit' (v. 8)? In line with my interest in John as a theological reader, writer and teacher I want to pursue just one question: if John himself is writing this in the Spirit, it is worth asking where it next blows him.

The third wave – beyond the Prologue: cross, love, judgement, deeds

Nicodemus' question in v. 9 leads into the third and longest wave of teaching. Yet, as many commentators note, it seems that after Jesus' initial response in v. 10 Nicodemus fades from the scene. Not only that, at some point (at the latest after v. 15), it hardly seems that Jesus is speaking. The whole passage culminates here in its most famous verse, 3:16. But now this wave goes further and also seems to move beyond the immediate context of the encounter of Jesus with Nicodemus. The style, tone and terminology are reminiscent of the Prologue. Indeed, one way of reading vv. 11–21 is as a further wave of the Prologue. It recapitulates its themes of testimony, believing, Moses, life, the world, the only Son, God's sending, light and darkness; but it also goes further in speaking of the lifting up on the cross, the love of God for the world, judgement and deeds which are done in darkness or in light.

²⁹ For more on the Prologue see David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine, 16 (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), pp. 53ff.

The theological intensity of this third wave also matches the Prologue. I will confine myself to two points about it.

First, the summary of John's whole message in 3:16 is not only explained further in vv. 17–21, but it also brings together all that has been said so far: the deep rationale and ultimate simplicity of what comes from above – up to now identified as the wind of the Spirit and the descending Son of Man – is the *love of God for the world*; and the deep rationale and ultimate simplicity of what human beings are invited into – up to now identified as the kingdom of God, being born of the Spirit and eternal life – is *believing in Jesus Christ*. The whole Gospel could be seen as an exegesis of this verse, just as it could also be seen as an unfolding of the Prologue.³⁰

Second, if this wave is read as what the Spirit has led John into beyond the previous waves, then one has to go beyond even the Prologue-inspired, comprehensive vision of theology outlined above. John does not let one be content with writing books or giving testimony, however true to Jesus Christ and to understanding 'all things', 'all people' and 'all truth' in his light. Here, in this third wave, we are confronted with the judgement of God, and it is not about book reviews or verdicts on thinking and teaching, but about what one has *done*. Indeed, it suggests that the truth of books and teaching is inseparable from how we live and act.

'Done in God'

'But those who do'³¹ what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God' (v. 21). Here action and truth go together in 'doing what is true'. That might sound a very activist theology, and in many ways it is. The rest of the Gospel above all spells it out in terms of loving as Jesus loved.

But that action-centred picture does not do full justice to the final phrase: 'done in God'. John's use of the little preposition 'in' might be seen as yet another key to his whole theology, accompanied by the corresponding verb, μένω (*menō*), meaning to dwell, abide, remain, stay, be in. Both occur throughout the Gospel, and they are given content through many stories, phrases, images and metaphors. A good example of them being used

³⁰ Another aspect of John's superabundant meaning is the number of 'key' concepts, themes or passages which can be plausibly proposed.

³¹ On John's use of the Greek word ποιέω, meaning 'do, make or create', and its relation to some of the themes of the present article, see David F. Ford, 'Beginning, Ending and Abundance: Genesis 1:1 and the Gospel of John', in David A. Baer and Robert P. Gordon (eds), *Leshon Limmudim: Essays on the Language and Literature of the Hebrew Bible in Honour of A. A. Macintosh* (London: T&T Clark, forthcoming). The essay also supplements the discussion above about intertextuality.

repeatedly together, and centred on the love of God, is in the parable of the vine in chapter 15, already discussed for its ‘as . . . so . . .’ example. The culminating content of this capacious ‘in’ comes in Jesus’ final prayer to his Father in chapter 17: ‘I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one . . . so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them’ (17:23, 26).

This indwelling, suggested by ‘in God’ in 3:21, is the ultimate context for all human being, understanding and action, and in John it is associated with a dwelling which reaches beyond activism. There is the Prologue’s picture of the only Son who is ‘close to the Father’s heart’ or ‘in the bosom of the Father’ (1:18), and there is the literal picture of the disciple whom Jesus loved reclining ‘in the bosom of Jesus’ (13:23). Being at a feast close to the one you love most is a fair picture of the trust, peace and joy that John associates with living ‘in God’. This is where John wants us all to end up, drawn to God by the love of Jesus Christ lifted up on the cross, breathing in his Spirit of love, and being his beloved disciple, not so much his servant as his friend.

Meeting Jesus and Nicodemus: the primacy of drama

But is this where Nicodemus ends up? I, like the third wave, have ended by speaking in a way which seems to have moved away from the drama of the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. I have arrived at theological teaching which culminates in doing the truth in love, intrinsic to which is encouragement to do further daring, imaginative, mind-stretching theological thinking. This is, I hope, true to John; but it is still missing a crucial dimension which can only be grasped by staying with the drama. This is an encounter in which Jesus meets Nicodemus and we the readers meet both of them, and it is part of a larger drama whose culminating event is the crucifixion of Jesus, to which it refers.

John’s way of letting us meet Jesus primarily through dramatic narrative is vitally important for theological interpretation. After the Prologue, John has several passages with Prologue-like content, such as that in the third wave of the Nicodemus story, and they are mostly to do with Jesus. But they are set in the midst of a thoroughly dramatic presentation of Jesus. Time and again we get to know Jesus through his meetings with others. It is tempting to grasp him mainly through the great concepts and images John uses, and these are endlessly rich. But John – in his whole way of writing the Gospel – suggests *the primacy of the drama for encountering Jesus*. The majority of the Gospel is carefully crafted narrative with a substantial dramatic content of people in interplay. There is far more discursive material than in the Synoptics, but

it does not overwhelm the dramatic narrative. We meet Jesus through his involvements with his disciples, John the Baptist, his opponents, a Samaritan woman, Martha and Mary, and events such as a wedding, the cleansing of the Temple, feasts in Jerusalem, several healings, a feeding, walking on water, raising Lazarus from death, having his feet anointed, his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, washing his disciples' feet, and his arrest, trial, death and resurrection appearances.

So the truth of this Gospel (like that of the others) is primarily *done*, performed in events and encounters. When these are recounted, there is relatively little discursive material: the heart of the matter is told in the language of events, actions and dialogues. Why? Many reasons could be given, but the primary one is that this is the main language we use when we want to portray people, whether in history, drama, novels or television 'soaps'. John above all wants us to meet a person, Jesus Christ. It is the 'who' question which matters most to him – and this is repeatedly underlined by his central character's use of 'I am' sayings. The primary perspective on reality is therefore not given through an overview or worldview, or a set of general truths and principles, or a set of images and metaphors, or an ethic giving specific instructions for behaviour, or a spirituality with a set of interior orientations and dispositions, or a doctrine or set of doctrines, or a kerygma challenging us to a decision, though all of these have their roles. Rather, it is given through a drama centring on a particular person.³²

The final incident told in the last chapter illustrates this. Peter asks about the death of the disciple whom Jesus loved (who, we are reminded, had reclined on Jesus' breast (στῆθος) at the Last Supper), and he is told: 'If it is my will that he remain (μένειν, *menein*) until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!' (21:22; cf. 23) *The perspective of following is of an ongoing drama, and this is also the perspective of mutual love.* So to follow him today requires continually pondering the drama, reading and rereading those events and dialogues, indwelling them with the help of the Prologue and other similar material, including libraries full of theology and other works, seeking above all to know who this person, Jesus Christ, is; and there is also a call continually to improvise upon that drama, generating new and unprecedented theologies,

³² For a fuller discussion of this see David F. Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), ch. 2. In terms of twentieth-century theology, one might see Barth majoring on the doctrinal (though in fact he also does justice to narrative) and Bultmann majoring on the existential. On John and classical drama, see the groundbreaking work of George L. Parsenios, *Departure and Consolation: The Johannine Farewell Discourses in Light of Greco-Roman Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2005) and *Rhetoric and Drama in the Johannine Lawsuit Motif* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

dialogues, actions, events and communities in trying to 'do the truth' in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

This description concerns meeting Jesus Christ; what, finally, about meeting Nicodemus? It is fascinating that he appears three times in John's Gospel, and commentators differ on each. The debate is over whether he becomes a disciple, whether he remains in the dark or whether he is ambivalent, not decisively one or the other. Distinguished interpreters, ancient and modern, have opted for each.³³

In my opinion he is best interpreted as being in the in-between position. He arrives speaking confidently of what he knows; he is challenged in his core identity and accompanying categories; he is offered mind-blowing ideas and images, and his last statement is: 'How can these things be?' He reappears in 7:50–2 where he courageously argues that Jesus be dealt with in accordance with the law, and is met with derision by his fellow Pharisees; and again in 19:38–42, when he joins Joseph of Arimathea in taking away the body of Jesus and laying it in a tomb, and brings with him an enormous amount of myrrh and aloes. All this suggests that he has stayed interested in and even fascinated by Jesus to the point of being willing to act in his favour and go to considerable expense for him. But this is by no means what John's Gospel means by full faith in Jesus.

³³ In addition to commentaries already referenced, for a forthcoming discussion see Craig Koester, 'Theological Complexity and the Characterization of Nicodemus in John's Gospel', in Christopher W. Skinner (ed.), *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, LNTS (London: T&T Clark, forthcoming). Cf. Jouette M. Bassler, 'Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108:4 (Winter 1989), pp. 635–46; Colleen M. Conway, 'Speaking through Ambiguity: Minor Characters in the Fourth Gospel', *Biblical Interpretation* 10:3 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 324–41; Steven Gunderson, 'The Use of Discourse Analysis in Character Studies: Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman (John 3–4)', in Stanley E. Porter and Matthew Brook O'Donnell (eds), *The Linguist as Pedagogue: Trends in the Teaching and Linguistic Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), pp. 113–26; Raimo Hakola, 'The Burden of Ambiguity: Nicodemus and the Social Identity of Johannine Christians', *New Testament Studies* 55:4 (October 2009), pp. 438–55; Marinus de Jonge, 'Nicodemus and Jesus: Some Observations on Misunderstanding and Understanding in the Fourth Gospel', in John E. Steeley (ed. and trans.), *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven and Son of God – Jesus Christ and the Christians in Johannine Perspective* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977), ch. 2; Francis J. Moloney, 'Adventure with Nicodemus: An Exercise in Hermeneutics', in 'A Hard Saying': *The Gospel and Culture* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), pp. 259–79; Jean-Marie Sevrin, 'The Nicodemus Enigma: The Characterization and Function of an Ambiguous Actor of the Fourth Gospel', in R. Bieringer, D. Pollefeyt and F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville (eds), *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel: Papers of the Leuven Colloquium, 2000* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 357–69.

Within the Gospel story, then, Nicodemus is somewhere between rejection of Jesus and full faith. In relation to a hypothesised Johannine community which has broken with the Jewish synagogue, Nicodemus might be a familiar figure: a Jewish leader who is not hostile to the followers of Jesus as Messiah and divine Son of God, but who also has not decided whether to break with the synagogue. In relation to Christians down the centuries, Nicodemus represents those who are powerful and religiously interested, questioning but undecided. In each age and situation he will mean different things to different people, and it is part of John's genius that he has written a Gospel which is rich, multi-levelled and open enough to inspire more and more readings.

What about today? As retrievals of past readings abound and new interpretations multiply, there can be no expectation of a single agreed understanding and application, especially of this briefly introduced and ambiguously characterised figure. I conclude with two sets of remarks, my attempt as a twenty-first-century Christian thinker to add some final touches to my attempt to discern where the wind of the Spirit is blowing now as I read John 3: 1–21. This is what Jews might call midrash, which is not claimed to be the plain sense of the text but is a possible reading in engagement with later issues or contemporary life. It is a little like what John does with Genesis 1:1 and many other texts.

Nicodemus beyond the plain sense

First, there is Nicodemus as a positive figure in our complexly religious and secular world.³⁴ He avoids the polarity of extremisms, whether religious or secular, and is more likely to engage in conversation than confrontation. He has his own non-Christian religious convictions, and stands for the best in his own tradition, reaching across boundaries, seeking fairness, trying to do the right thing, and generous to those he considers to be doing God's will, even if he cannot go the whole way with what they believe and what their beliefs lead them to do. In a world of much foolish faith and dangerous faith he stands for sensible, ethical and generous faith. He is well-educated; he studies, prays, seeks out religious wisdom among those outside his own group and asks serious questions. He understands the importance of institutions and plays a responsible, conscientious and leading role in those of his own tradition. He knows how to deal with secular authorities, uses his skills and influence on behalf not only of his own community but also of others, and he will even

³⁴ On the religious and secular character of our world and a theological response to it, see David F. Ford, *Shaping Theology: Engagements in a Religious and Secular World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

donate to their causes. He is a teacher as well as a leader, and he supports an education system which takes religions and religious literacy seriously. Occasionally he gets involved with the more radical and enthusiastic side of religion, and part of him longs for the sort of wholehearted, childlike new beginning that some others seem to have experienced. But despite some challenging conversations, conducted out of the glare of publicity, it has never seemed wise to follow such a risky path personally, and he has opted for a life of faithful religion, responsible citizenship and service of what he sees as the common good.

Second, there is Nicodemus as a Christian alter ego, as we who are Christians identify part of ourselves with him in his dramatic meeting with Jesus. We too come to the light 'by night', and there are parts of us that shy away from exposure. When Jesus meets the Nicodemus in us we find ourselves challenged on many fronts. Are my imagination and vocation being stretched in relation to the God of radical love, surprise initiatives and fresh starts? Am I stuck in a framework which limits what God can be imagined to be about? Do I need to be more open to the sober intoxication of the Spirit which is being given to renew not only me but the whole of creation? Is my mind being opened to think of knowing and believing differently, using categories and concepts more adequate to a free, self-giving God whose 'thoughts are not our thoughts'? Is my desire utterly for the kingdom of God, birth from above, eternal life, God's love and light, or for something else? What about the challenge of meeting Jesus Christ, his death by crucifixion embodying the love of God, and his bringing the wind of the Spirit which guides into all truth but also enables doing that truth? Above all, where am I in relation to God? This is the core spiritual challenge emerging from Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus, summed up by those last two words of the English text: 'in God'.

Conclusion

Many more such midrashic approaches to Nicodemus are possible. Risking such interpretations is, I suggest, the sort of activity implied by John's own practice of theological reading, writing and teaching, and by his trust in the Spirit leading into all the truth and even into doing 'greater things'. Yet, for all the openness and potential for improvisation, there is also the definiteness, discipline and central focus of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, who remains the main character of the ongoing drama, while simultaneously being the divine 'I am'.