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The Message of Nicodemus

Keith J. Wilson

A common error of New Testament readers is to approach the four Gospels as a historical text. While it is true that these books contain much history, they were not written with that as their primary purpose. Instead, the four Gospels were written to persuade various audiences that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Messiah and the literal Son of God, and each author endeavored through his perspective to present the case for the divine Jesus.

The Gospel of John is a straightforward example of persuasive writing. John the Beloved writes with the express purpose, “that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name”(John 20:31), which is certainly a statement of strong predisposition or mindset. Additionally, the Prophet Joseph Smith changed the very title of the “Gospel of John” to read the “Testimony of John.” A testimony seems to have a much smaller circumference than a gospel. For most people a testimony is bearing witness of a specific experience or truth. The same holds true for the apostle John. As he writes, he presents his prophetic witness of selected truths about the Savior, which he desires to impress upon all who will listen to his words.

With the idea in mind that John is intentionally selecting certain historical facts to support his prophetic account, it is intriguing to examine a prominent individual who is exclusive to the New Testament record of John. Nicodemus, whose name means “conqueror of the people” in Greek, surfaces three times in the Gospel of John. The first mention of Nicodemus comes in the well-known exchange with Jesus about the doctrine of spiritual rebirth. The other two

appearances are relatively brief, yet nonetheless, significant. Considering his stature, it seems odd that the other evangelists would fail to mention Nicodemus. Yet perhaps Nicodemus was not so much a synoptic omission as he was a Johannine inclusion. Apparently John sees a message in the man that the others overlook, one which allows him to testify, to instruct, and to lead all believers through his account of the man Nicodemus.

The fact that Nicodemus surfaces in just one account out of four is strong evidence that John may have caught and preserved some things which others did not. But this isolated testimony also presents a challenge within its very singularity. Is John's purpose for his presentation of Nicodemus abundantly clear or is there room for ambiguity in the Nicodemus message? I suggest that the answer is that John's presentation of Nicodemus' motives and actions yields considerable ambiguity.

Contemporary interpretations of Nicodemus generally separate into two areas of thought. One camp views Nicodemus as a cautious convert who grows more courageous as time passes and eventually shows himself as a devoted disciple. The second interpretation of Nicodemus posits that Nicodemus represents a reluctant witness who feels drawn to accept the Savior's message but lacks the internal strength to fully commit. These two interpretations pose an interesting case of contrasts. Furthermore, it is difficult to find much common ground between the two perspectives. What then is the scriptural support for each position?

Nicodemus a Courageous Convert

The first reference to Nicodemus in the Gospel of John comes in John 3:1-15. In this most notable of the Nicodemus passages the Savior instructs Nicodemus about the concept of

physical and spiritual rebirth, the visitation of the Spirit, and the image of the brazen serpent on the pole as a representation of Christ. Those who champion the converted Nicodemus interpretation attach several meanings to the respective scriptural passages. Nicodemus was a ruler of Jews, which suggests he belonged to the Jewish Sanhedrin (v. 1). It is possible he came to Jesus by night (v. 2) for multiple reasons. First, during the day he was so busy that he could not free himself from his pressing leadership responsibilities. Second, at nighttime he could find uninterrupted time with Jesus. Third, it conformed to a rabbinic custom of staying up at night to study the law.¹ During the visit he calls Jesus “Rabbi”—a term of respect, worthy of a superior teacher. Then with his mention of Christ’s miracles, Nicodemus refers to Jesus as a prophet (v. 2). In the remainder of this passage Jesus makes it very clear that Nicodemus must make more than just superficial changes. He must experience a comprehensive spiritual transformation. The Savior concludes his instructions with the invitation to look to the cross or “the pole” for salvation (vs. 14-15). Even though no other conversion clues appear evident in this chapter, proponents of this idea suggest that the developmental process had commenced within Nicodemus.

The second encounter of Jesus with Nicodemus is recorded in John 7:45-52, where the Sanhedrin attempts to arrest Jesus without a cause. When the Pharisees ridicule the soldiers as well as the common people for not knowing the law and being “duped” by Jesus, whom they considered a Messianic imposter (v. 49), Nicodemus boldly raises the question whether or not the Sanhedrin has the right to overlook due process. Ironically, the Sanhedrin then accuses Nicodemus of sympathizing with Jesus, and perhaps even being one of his disciples. The narrative ends there. For those

who place Nicodemus with the believers this exchange is courageous. Quoting the Johannine scholar, Jon Paulien, “His reaction to the council’s desire to arrest Jesus was boldly calculated to bring out the irony of their lawless act at the very moment in which they were ridiculing the lawless behavior of the ‘crowd.’”² To those who favor this interpretation it seems Nicodemus was now willing to risk his professional standing.

The final episode between Nicodemus and Jesus is the account of Jesus’ burial recorded in John 19:38. In this account Nicodemus joins with Joseph of Arimathea to wrap the body in a large quantity of burial spices and then place it in the new sepulcher. Those who see these actions as evidence of Nicodemus’ belief in Jesus point to two aspects in this account. First, they identify Nicodemus as a wealthy man who brought a hundred pounds of costly spices, equal to that given to deceased royalty.³ Second, Nicodemus was willing to step forth when all the Savior’s chosen disciples had deserted in fear. For them this Nicodemus is no timid devotee. He reflects the literal meaning of his name as he conquers spiritual darkness. Thus Nicodemus stands for many as a courageous convert who had overcome the stifling traditions of Judaism.

The historical Christian tradition for the converted Nicodemus motif has also been popular through the years. Legend has it that Nicodemus testified in favor of Christ at the trial before Pilate, was expelled from his position by the ruling Jews, and was eventually baptized by Peter and John. The apocryphal writing known as “The Acts of Pilate” was renamed the “Gospel of Nicodemus” in the fourteenth century and has retained that designation in the Latin Christian tradition.⁴ Even though this “Gospel” adds no new information about Nicodemus, it is a reminder of the groundswell favoring the converted Pharisee position.

The Hesitant Follower

On the other hand, a very different view considers the three scriptural accounts of the Johannine Nicodemus and concludes that here is a man who felt drawn to the Savior and his message, but who was never able to totally and unconditionally follow the Lord. This group challenges all to consider Nicodemus as a hesitant follower.

The bulk of evidence for the hesitant-follower interpretation of Nicodemus comes from the John 3 passage. These verses begin with Nicodemus, a member of the powerful Sanhedrin coming to the Savior at night. A significant issue here is why he comes after hours. The hesitant interpretation suggests that Nicodemus fears for his social and political position and seeks to avoid any negative repercussions by visiting him at night. Yet another point in the argument for hesitancy comes as Nicodemus addresses Jesus with the title, “Rabbi.” Even though he is not a rabbi per se, Jesus was regarded as a learned, esteemed teacher in the community.⁵ Nicodemus shows this respect with the subsequent phrase, “a teacher come from God”(v. 2). However, these expressions stop short of total respect, and Nicodemus fails to move to the next level by addressing Jesus as “prophet” or “Messiah.”

Yet another layer of the hesitancy argument comes in Nicodemus’ use of the plural subject, “We know that thou art a teacher—come from God.” There is no evidence that Nicodemus brought anyone else with him that night. His use of the plural pronoun “we” makes his inquiry less personal. The fact that he may not be taking direct responsibility for his question further supports the claims for his timidity.

Without further formality, Jesus replies by cutting right to the issue of spiritual rebirth. He declares it to be total and to include both water and spirit. Nicodemus’ rejoinder, “can he

enter into his mothers womb,” (v. 4) borders on either the ridiculous, the insulting, or the incredulous. With the exception of his introductory query about salvation, Nicodemus presents throughout the remaining dialogue a proud, resistant disposition rather than a humble, inquisitive one.

There is yet more support for the position of Nicodemus’s hesitancy. When Jesus expounds the doctrine of spiritual rebirth both physically and spiritually and also attributes it all to the “wind” or will of God, Nicodemus bluntly confesses his lack of understanding, to which the Savior returns a very terse question, “Art thou a master of Israel and knowest not these things?” (v. 10) “Master” can also be translated “the teacher of Israel.” Considering Nicodemus’ use of the “teacher come from God” this rejoinder has some sting to it. Jesus then levies sharp criticism by saying that Nicodemus has not accepted his witness and as a result will not be able to understand spiritual phenomena (v. 11). These statements do not reflect a gentle coaxing by a master teacher. Rather, they are filled with directness meant to expose the erudite attitude of a haughty Jew. Those who favor a hesitant Nicodemus note that John’s record in chapter 3 does not refer to Nicodemus again, resulting in a lack of formal closure to the episode.

The second reference to Nicodemus in John cited by those favoring the hesitancy theory comes during the Feast of Tabernacles in chapter 7. Here the Pharisees accuse their soldiers of not understanding the law and sympathizing with Jesus. Nicodemus steps forward, posing the question, “Doth our law judge any man before it hear him, and know what he doeth?” (v. 51) They reply, “Art thou also of Galilee? Search and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet” (v.52). In this passage the supposedly hesitant Nicodemus appears to experience a rush of confidence. At first glance he seems to

be confronting the entire Sanhedrin. However, his courage seems tentative at best. Note how he avoids a categorical defense of Jesus. Instead he raises a rhetorical question about their lack of due process, conveniently leaving himself a quick escape route. The response of the Pharisees confirms their vindictiveness as they scorch Nicodemus with a provincial slur (v. 52). He retreats without even so much as a word. All this when it was obvious both from Jewish traditions and scriptures that some noteworthy prophets were indeed from Galilee (2 Kings 14:25). In this incident Nicodemus quickly concedes the argument and wilts under pressure.

The final appearance of Nicodemus comes after the crucifixion. Joseph of Arimathea whom John identifies as a disciple of Jesus approaches Pilate and has the body of Jesus released to him. This he does secretly “for fear of the Jews” (John 19:38). Thereafter Nicodemus comes with the hundred pounds of spices. He teams with Joseph and they wrap the body with the prepared spices and place it in the sepulcher.

In this exchange John places Nicodemus in a supportive role with Joseph taking the lead. Even so, Joseph is described as fearful and cautious. To those favoring the hesitancy theory, this relegates Nicodemus to an even more hesitant, timid posture. If Nicodemus had committed to follow Christ would not there have been strength in numbers as they appeared before Pilate? Since Nicodemus occupied a position of leadership in the Sanhedrin would not he have been an asset in appearing before Pilate? These questions buttress the interpretation of Nicodemus as a hesitant follower. John consistently shares details about Nicodemus which portray him as quietly sympathetic but openly hesitant.

These overviews constitute the two major approaches to understanding Nicodemus. For those who favor a committed convert the following is significant:

1. Nicodemus is a powerful “ruler” but he still comes. (3:1)
2. He comes at night to receive quality, uninterrupted instruction. (3:2)
3. Nighttime was a traditional time for deep study. (3:2)
4. Nicodemus’ reference to Christ is very close to a “prophet.” (3:2)
5. Nicodemus boldly and publicly defends Jesus before the Sanhedrin. (7:51)
6. He shows symbolic respect by anointing Jesus with a regal portion of spices. (19:39)
7. Nicodemus makes his discipleship public as he assists Joseph of Arimathea with the burial. (19:39)

On the other hand, there are some persuasive arguments for Nicodemus as a hesitant, non-committal type:

1. Nicodemus comes after dark to protect his social/political position. (3:2)
2. His use of the title Rabbi shows respect but stops short of worship. (3:2)
3. He refuses full responsibility for his question by addressing Jesus with a plural subject. (3:2)
4. His questions to the Savior are blunt, defensive, and resistive. (3:4, 9)
5. Jesus’ statement to Nicodemus is terse and condemns him for a lack of faith. (3:11)
6. Nicodemus questions the Sanhedrin in a bold move, but then he backs down even after they give a flimsy answer. (7:52)

7. He teams with Joseph of Arimathea in a secretive manner to give the body of Jesus a proper burial. (19:38-39)

Each of these positions seems to offer plausible reasons to interpret Nicodemus in opposite ways. Is it possible that John purposefully presented Nicodemus as an enigma? Probably not. This conclusion seems out of character with other Johannine declarations. John has a forceful purpose in his writing as attested to by his statement, “But these are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” (John 20:31). His intent is not to create literal or figurative ambiguity. There must be more to consider.

To this point we have focused on magnifying each verse within the three Nicodemus passages. Perhaps a macro analysis of all three encounters would assist in discerning John’s perspective. The first look might be directed to repetitive textual symbolisms. One of John’s most notable symbols is light and darkness. He employs these symbols repeatedly in his account. For example, he records Jesus describing himself as “the light of the world” during the Feast of Tabernacles (John 8), wherein traditionally the giant temple candelabra were lit. He heals the man born blind, restoring him from physical darkness back to light, and then he restores him from spiritual darkness to spiritual light (John 9). As Jesus discourses in John 3:19-21, he compares his ministry as light to the world, while those who hate truth move from light to darkness. This light/darkness symbolism pervades much of John’s writing.

Against this backdrop shines a fascinating shadow. Every time John mentions Nicodemus he makes reference to Nicodemus’ first visit *at night*. With his strong penchant for using this symbol negatively, he must be reinforcing his

perspective of Nicodemus. Why else would he repeat it in all of his accounts?

Another observation that combines various scriptural texts focuses on the contradictory descriptions of Joseph of Arimathea. In Luke's Gospel he credits Joseph with openly opposing the Sanhedrin (23:51) and Mark states that he "went in boldly unto Pilate and craved the body of Jesus" (15:43). These accounts differ somewhat from John's portrayal of Joseph as a disciple who came secretly for "fear of the Jews" (19:38). Why did John see Joseph as walking in the shadows to avoid detection? John treats Joseph and Nicodemus together whereas the others only describe Joseph. When Nicodemus is not a part of the equation then Joseph is a bold, courageous Pharisee. When Nicodemus is included then he tilts John's perception to a negative attitude of fear and secrecy. The difference seems to be Nicodemus.

An additional passage in John 12 appears to support this Nicodemus interpretation without specifically mentioning him by name. Beginning with verse 42 John writes: "Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue." Then the Evangelist summarizes his comment with the next verse. "For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God." In this observation John identifies a considerable group of leaders in the Jewish Sanhedrin who quietly accepted Jesus and his message.⁶ Yet they walked in fear of excommunication and losing their position of authority. John minces few words over this group as he forcefully denounces them for placing worldly concerns ahead of commitment to God. Given the fact that Nicodemus was squarely within this body of rulers and that he was sympathetic to Jesus' message, it seems reasonable that John is using this reference to identify both

Nicodemus and others who were touched but hesitated to fully follow Christ.

A final issue deals with the conclusions of each Nicodemus passage. There is scarcely any closure whatsoever to any of the Nicodemus episodes. In John 3 the Savior's discourse gradually moves away from direct conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus and seems to conclude as a monologue. Chapters 7 and 19 have a slightly stronger ending, but Nicodemus still is left hanging. Had John seen a change in Nicodemus' heart certainly he would have highlighted it for all to see. Instead, the lights dim on Nicodemus almost as quickly as when they illuminated him. This could possibly be John's way of leaving his readership hanging. Since Nicodemus never breaks out of his hesitant posture John never gives closure to his portrayal.

An LDS Interpretation

Considering these reasons, it appears that John sides with the hesitant Nicodemus adherents. Yet for inquiring LDS minds there is an additional source of information concerning the Nicodemus quandary. What have modern prophets written and stated about this individual? How have they characterized him? Latter-day prophets have shown some diversity in their pronouncements. There have been references to Nicodemus as "a busy man" which necessitated a nighttime visit.⁷ But the majority of comments have sided firmly with the hesitant interpretation.⁸

One of the most forceful LDS presentations that utilized the Nicodemus theme was given by Spencer W. Kimball in general conference, April 1958. Elder Kimball's talk addressed the process of obtaining spiritual knowledge. For his text he recreated the entire Nicodemus conversation in John 3. He opened with little doubt as to his interpretation:

Eternal life is the greatest gift. To obtain it is not easy. The price is high. Nicodemus of old inquired the price. The answer perplexed him. Let us interview that good man who came so near and yet evidently missed the mark.

Your name is Nicodemus? You are a member of the powerful sect of the Pharisees?

It is night now. You have not been seen. You are addressing our Lord.

After rehearsing the entire dialogue Elder Kimball summarized his point with this piercing conclusion:

My heart weeps for you, friend Nicodemus. You seem such a good man, philanthropic, kind, generous. You could have been such a power in the Lord's kingdom. You had a spark of desire. It could have been kindled into a living flame. You might have been one of his seventies, . . . an apostle, or even the President of His Church. . . . How little we realize the doors of opportunity which we often close with one wrong decision.

Then Elder Kimball finished his talk with a personal plea: "If any of you, my listeners, is a modern Nicodemus, I beg of you to grasp the new world of truths. Your Lord Jesus Christ pleads with you."⁹

There was little doubt in Elder Kimball's mind about John's perspective of Nicodemus. The issue for Elder Kimball was that John is teaching about the cost of discipleship. Will a true disciple respond to the coaxing of the Spirit and fully follow Christ, or will there be hesitation?

President Gordon B. Hinckley has centered many of his discourses on this topic of committed discipleship. In some of his comments, he has quoted directly from the Nicodemus accounts. In April 1998 he declared:

This thing which we call testimony is the great strength of the Church. It is the wellspring of faith and activity. . . . The Lord

described it when he spoke to Nicodemus and said, ‘The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit.’

He continued,

Personal testimony is the factor which turns people around. . . . This is the element which motivates. . . . This is the quiet, encouraging voice which sustains.

. . . It is of the very essence of this work. It is what is moving the work of the Lord forward. . . . It impels to action. It demands that we do what we are asked to do. It brings with it the assurance that life is purposeful, that some things are of far greater importance than others.

It is this element . . . which moves every investigator in the direction of conversion.¹⁰

His message closely parallels the scriptural account of the hesitant Nicodemus. He obviously is admonishing all Latter-day Saints to stand up and be numbered in the cause of Christ. His voice seems to echo the scriptural message of Nicodemus in the Gospel of John—namely, exposure to truth is not enough. The real issue centers in the courage to follow. That is the message of Nicodemus.

In summary, the Gospel of John is a testimony from John the Beloved about discipleship. Of all the gospel writers only one tells of the man named Nicodemus. Through thoughtful analysis of the text, the common synoptic threads, and the Johannine symbolism, it seems most reasonable that Nicodemus was included to teach all about the covenant to follow Christ. Even though this process requires certain costs and sacrifices, it returns a life which is eternal.

Notes

1. Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 124.
2. Jon Paulien, "Nicodemus," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:1105.
3. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 729-30.
4. Paulien, 4:1106.
5. Morris, 187-88, 137-38.
6. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, The Anchor Bible Series (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 483-84.
7. David O. McKay, Conference Report, April 1959, 48.
8. For other examples of the 'hesitant interpretation,' see the following: *The Gospel Kingdom: Selections from the Writings and Discourses of John Taylor*, ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 93. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1962) 163. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1976), 1:141.
9. Conference Report, April 1958, 13-17.
10. *Ensign*, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, May 1998, 69-70.