

Nicodemus - how Jesus made a friend, LeGrand Baker

Letter to David S. King

Your note about Nicodemus was very timely. Only yesterday I was reading the Nicodemus story with a very close friend. I love the story because of the trust / friendship relationship it establishes between Nicodemus and the Saviour. If you will indulge me I would like to go through it with you. I wish we were together so we could talk!

I agree with you that the story actually begins in the previous chapter, so let's start there.

JOHN, CHAPTER 2

23 Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did.

24 But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, I think that's the key to the whole story. The footnote says that "commit" might have been translated "entrust." That is, Jesus was willing to let the people see only his miracles, but he was not willing to let them know who he was, or by what authority he did those miracles.

25 And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man. His reluctance was based on the very simple fact that he knew in advance how they would respond to him and to his testimony.

CHAPTER 3

1 There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:

2 The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.

So Nicodemus introduces himself to Jesus by saying the very thing that disqualifies him from receiving Jesus testimony. But Jesus knows his heart, so this time it doesn't matter. That introduction was followed by some conversation which John does not tell us about, leaving us to ask, "why did John give us these parts of the conversation and leave out the others?" I'm convinced his primary purpose was to tell us about the depth of Jesus friendship with Nicodemus, so those are the only parts of the conversation he gives us — and then only just enough that we can understand.

3 Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

If we read this the way Wilfred Griggs suggests, the Greek text says, "Except a man be born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

4 Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?

There are two ways to read that. The usual way is to assume that Nicodemus thought that was a stupid thing to say, and was trying to bait Jesus.

The second way — the one I think is a necessary introduction to the rest of the story — is that Nicodemus did understand and wanted to know what and why.

The reason I think that, is that the ideas of sonship and birthright were central to Jewish legal and theological thought. In Psalm 2, in Jesus' baptism, and on the Mt. of Transfiguration, "You are my son" is a designation of royal birth and kingship. The Jews had lost the ancient temple rites suggested in Psalm 2, but the scriptures talk about those rites, and Nicodemus must have known

about them, and that the Jews no longer had them. So it seems reasonable to me that Nicodemus — a Jewish scholar — could well have been asking, "what does one have to do to be born again at my age — to become a 'son' and heir of God?"

Jesus' answer addresses Nicodemus' question precisely: He explained there is another birth that introduces one into the kingdom of God — if it is a birth, then, by definition, it makes the person both son and heir.

5 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

7 Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.

The translation of the next verse is interesting. Because Nicodemus asked, "How can these things be?" the translators believed he was dumbfounded at such an answer. So they have Jesus say:

8 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*.

As you know, the word that they later translated as "spirit" in the second instance, they translated as "wind" in the first.

9 Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be?

10 Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?

If Jesus was frowning, his words mocked Nicodemus learning as not worth much.

But if Jesus was smiling, his words would have meant: "Now, let's look into the very depth of your knowledge so I can show you." Where he takes Nicodemus' mind from here, strongly suggests the latter meaning.

11 Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye [plural] receive not our witness.

12 If I have told you earthly things, and ye [plural] believe not, how shall ye [plural] believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?

"Ye" is plural, so he is talking about the Pharisees' not believing, and he is not accusing Nicodemus personally. In the Inspired Version, Joseph Smith made sense of that verse by beginning the next one with the words, "I tell you," which I take to mean, "I am telling only you, and not those Pharisees who will not believe."

I am absolutely convinced that Jesus would never have spoken the next lines to anyone whom he distrusted.

13 [I tell you] And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.

Jesus had just finished saying, "We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen." Now he confides to Nicodemus that what he has seen is the *sode*. *That is*, like Isaiah, he had returned to the Council in Heaven and knew the plans and decisions of that Council. Saying that to Nicodemus was necessary, because that would have been the only evidence that Nicodemus, a learned Jew, could have accepted to support the proposition that Jesus was a true prophet. I have no doubt that Nicodemus knew the criterion as Jeremiah established it, for knowing and identifying a true prophet. (I am adding some bold italics to this, and to some later scriptures to help show you what I mean.) This is the criteria for identifying a true prophet, as Jeremiah described it.

16 Thus saith the Lord of hosts, Hearken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy

unto you: they make you vain: they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the Lord.

17 They say still unto them that despise me, The Lord hath said, Ye shall have peace; and they say unto every one that walketh after the imagination of his own heart, No evil shall come upon you.

18 *For who hath stood in the counsel of the Lord [sode experience], and hath perceived and heard his word? who hath marked his word, and heard it?*

It seems to me that "*perceived*" here, is the same as Lehi and Alma's "*thought he saw God;*" and Enoch's "*and I understood as I saw.*"

19 Behold, a whirlwind of the Lord is gone forth in fury, even a grievous whirlwind: it shall fall grievously upon the head of the wicked.

20 The anger of the Lord shall not return, until he have executed, and till he have performed the thoughts of his heart: in the latter days ye shall consider it perfectly.

21 I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied.

22 *But if they had stood in my counsel, and had caused my people to hear my words, then they should have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their doings.*

(Jeremiah 23:1-40.)

Here, Jeremiah identifies a true prophet as one who has had a *sode* experience, and who has returned from the Council to deliver God's word to the people. He says that a false prophet is one who has not had a *sode* experience and who only speaks from his own imagination. Nephi began the Small Plates by saying he had a knowledge of the mysteries [*probably "sode"*] of God, and then by telling about Lehi's own *sode* experience. I suspect that the reason he began that way was to clearly identify to his readers that he and his father had been to the Council, received instruction, and were delivering the messages they had been instructed to deliver – that they were therefore true prophets. For that same reason, the First Vision is both the beginning and the most critical part of the Joseph Smith story.

The next part of Jesus statement is a necessary conclusion to the first: "[I tell you] And no man hath ascended up to heaven [had a *sode* experience], but he that came down from heaven [to testify: a prophet has a *sode* experience is obliged to warn the people, according to the instructions he received at the Council.]" Jesus is saying that not only has he had a *sode* experience, but also that the message he is delivering is from God.

Then the Saviour tells Nicodemus the great secret: Not only was Jesus at the Council in Heaven, but he was the one who conducted the meetings there, and it was he who gave the assignments to the other prophets and kings: "...even the Son of man which is in heaven." "Son" is the royal king-name, so by declaring himself to be "the Son of Man," he is declaring his position in the Council.

As a confirmation that Jesus, Jehovah, and Messiah are the same person, Jesus added,

14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:

15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

18 He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned

already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. The explanation of why Jesus referred to that bronze serpent, and why Nicodemus should understand Jesus' meaning, is not given in the Old Testament. But when Nephi referred to it, he did not explain it, but used it as evidence — suggesting that the people had a full understanding of its meaning.

14 Yea, did he not bear record that the Son of God should come? And as he lifted up the brazen serpent in the wilderness, even so shall he be lifted up who should come.

15 And as many as should look upon that serpent should live, even so as many as should look upon the Son of God with faith, having a contrite spirit, might live, even unto that life which is eternal.

16 And now behold, Moses did not only testify of these things, but also all the holy prophets, from his days even to the days of Abraham. (Helaman 8:14-16)

It seems perfectly reasonable to me that the Nephites got that understanding from the Brass Plates, and therefore, that the ancient Jews had a similar understanding — that Moses' serpent represented the death and healing powers of the Messiah. On the assumption that that understanding was not lost to the Jews until after Jesus' time, it seems that Jesus could do what Nephi did: simply mention Moses' serpent to Nicodemus, and Nicodemus would understand that he was identifying himself as the healing Messiah.

So far in this conversation, Jesus has not only told Nicodemus that he is Jehovah/Messiah; but he has explained that he is the "Son" — heir — of the Father-God who presides at the Council; and that he is the promised Messiah. Having done that, Jesus now told him everything else there was to tell.

19 And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

20 For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.

21 But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.

Jesus just identified himself as the personification of the Father's "Light", that is, the power of creation and of life. Jesus has now told Nicodemus all there is to say. He has defined himself the same way John defines him at the beginning of the gospel — not only as the Son of God, but also as the very source of light and truth — the origin of all things.

The next verse reads:

22 After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judaea; and there he tarried with them, and baptized.

It does not say that Nicodemus was among those who were baptized, but the verse does seem to be intended as the conclusion of the Nicodemus story

Later John shows that Nicodemus was a true friend, who defended Jesus against the Pharisees (John 7:45-53.), and after Jesus was crucified, he and Joseph of Arimathaea arranged that Jesus' body should be properly buried. (John 19:38-42.)

I love that story because it is one of the very few where one can actually watch Jesus making a new friend. He does it, not by chiding or admonishing, but by simply making himself visible to one whom he can trust — he "entrusted" himself — made himself vulnerable — to Nicodemus.

He virtually exposed his soul and let his new friend see who he was. I cannot envision that conversation without imagining that it concluded with a hug — a long and very beautiful hug between two men who truly loved each other. It reminds me of two others: Moroni's similar testimony:

39 And then shall ye know that I have seen Jesus, and that he hath talked with me face to face, *and that he told me in plain humility, even as a man telleth another* in mine own language, *concerning these things*;

40 And only a few have I written, because of my weakness in writing.

41 And now, I would commend you to seek this Jesus of whom the prophets and apostles have written, that the grace of God the Father, and also the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost, which beareth record of them, may be and abide in you forever. Amen. (Ether 12:39-41)

And Lehi's:

But behold, the Lord hath redeemed my soul from hell; I have beheld his glory, and I am encircled about eternally in the arms of his love. (2 Nephi 1:15.)

My love to each of you

LeGrand