

*Characters who count: the case of Nicodemus**Jaime Clark-Soles*

In *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, Dodd labours to find a way to fit the narratological aspects of the Fourth Gospel into a historical investigation. Writing in the 1960s, with the Dead Sea Scrolls recently discovered and seismic epistemological shifts occurring, Dodd optimistically invites the application of newer methodologies to the interpretation of his beloved Fourth Gospel. I accept Dodd's invitation by attending to the Johannine characterization of Nicodemus with the aid of the work of narrative critics and classicists. In what follows, I will briefly review the three contexts in which Nicodemus appears in the Fourth Gospel, address Dodd's treatment of Nicodemus, and offer an analysis that may provide an alternative to the limitations of Dodd's approach.

Nicodemus appears first in John 3:1–21. Not insignificantly for a Gospel whose narrator loves light, Nicodemus first comes to Jesus 'by night' and, among other heavenly things, hears about being born *ἄνωθεν*. In 7:50–2 Nicodemus questions the legal judgement of his Pharisaic colleagues with respect to the treatment of Jesus. In his final narrative appearance, Nicodemus, strikingly denoted as 'the one who had at first come to Jesus by night', accompanies Joseph of Arimathea to retrieve Jesus' body from Pilate (19:38–42).

Though Nicodemus appears far more often than a figure such as Nathaniel, to whom Dodd devotes considerable attention, Dodd does not take a keen interest in him. When he treats material from John 3:1–21, his conclusions are limited to form-critical and source-critical concerns. Of particular interest to this chapter, however, is a suggestive comment made by Dodd when treating John 3:3 and 3:5, which speak of birth from above as a key to entering the kingdom of God. Dodd argues that this doctrine is found neither in the Synoptics nor in the rest of the NT (1963: 358). Rather, the notion of rebirth is more commensurate with 'various forms of Hellenistic mysticism' (1953: 304). This perspective, paired with Dodd's occasional reference to *dramatis personae*, adumbrates

literary-critical approaches to the Fourth Gospel, including the recent fascination with characterization, not to mention the work of scholars who allow the techniques of ancient Greek drama to inform their interpretation of John (Brant 2004; Koester 2002; Parsenios 2010). While NT scholars are accustomed to referring to the ‘Hellenistic background’ of the Fourth Gospel, it may be more accurate to speak of the ‘Hellenistic foreground’. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere (Clark-Soles 2006), there are places in the Fourth Gospel where one can specifically identify the philosophical or religious system with which the Fourth Evangelist is engaging (such as Epicureanism). In other words, just as Abraham Malherbe gave us *Paul and the Popular Philosophers*, a monograph on *John and the Popular Philosophers* is long overdue.

Given the Hellenistic context of the Fourth Gospel, it makes sense to explore how characterization in John may be elucidated by the work of classicists. With respect to audience, Thatcher summarizes: ‘Dodd envisions that the Fourth Gospel’s ideal reader is a non-Christian, Hellenistic Jew or pagan who lives in Western Asia Minor around the year 100 CE’ (Chapter 1, above). How might Nicodemus play to such an audience? Before pursuing that, let us review Dodd’s treatment of the Nicodemus data beyond John 3, even though he does not mention Nicodemus’s rather vivid appearance in chapter 7.

All of the Gospels depict Joseph of Arimathea as taking the body of Jesus, although none of the Synoptics includes Nicodemus. Dodd writes (1963: 138): ‘It would be easy enough to regard this [John 19:38–42] as no more than a secondary account based on the Synoptics, if we supposed the introduction of Nicodemus to be due to a special interest of this evangelist in a *dramatis persona* whom he has brought into his story more than once . . .’. Dodd here provides a tantalizing teaser concerning the role of Nicodemus. Dodd is keen to defend John’s historical value vis-à-vis the Synoptics. It is not surprising, then, to find him making the following claim about chapter 19: ‘We are insufficiently informed; but it is not axiomatic that the Synoptic account is better based than the Johannine. Nor is it certain that Nicodemus is a less historical character than Joseph’ (1963: 139 n. 2). He imagines that Nicodemus might be historical, but he says no more, with the exception of the following: ‘There is nothing to connect the Jerusalem millionaire Naqdimon ben Gorion with the rabbi of John iii. 1’ (1963: 304 n. 3).

Dodd’s methodology and assumptions regarding which characters matter most (John the Baptist and ‘the First Disciples’) relegate Nicodemus to an obscurity that would be unimaginable for the narrator of the

Fourth Gospel whose chief aim is announced at 20:31. Nicodemus should be considered a major character: he punctuates the Gospel from beginning to end, he resists closure, and he has the potential to evoke a catalytic response from an audience.

### Character and personality

With respect to Nicodemus, representational interpretations abound (Culpepper 1983; Bennema 2009). Scholars attempt to adjudicate Nicodemus as good, bad, or ambiguous.<sup>1</sup> In these analyses, Nicodemus is taken as a type or a representative of a particular group, trait, or response (Koester 2003; Meeks 1972; Conway 1999). But which trait or group? The problem with the ‘representative’ approach (to which Dodd alludes) is that it cannot account without remainder for all of the Nicodemus material.

If representational arguments appear lacking, how else might we account for Nicodemus’s place in the Gospel? Classicist Christopher Gill presents two aspects of characterization in ancient tragedy which may help: (1) the ‘character-viewpoint,’ which tends toward the moralistic and representational, and (2) the ‘personality-viewpoint,’ which is more nuanced and complex. Gill writes:

When the character-viewpoint shifts to the personality-viewpoint . . . what happens is not that we focus on ‘self’ in place of ‘action’, but that the whole basis of selfhood as well as of action is differently understood, and both are pulled into the same glaring light that is also a kind of blackness and opacity. This example may help to show that to analyze the nature of the focus on the persons in a tragedy can also bring the characteristic focus of the play, indeed the whole genre, into sharper relief. [1986: 272]

Additional working assumptions guide my analysis of Nicodemus. First, ‘a character is a construct developed during the reading process out of textual indicators’ (Burnett 1993: 3). Secondly, readers construct characters in a linear, sequential fashion (Burnett 1993; Darr 1998).

Character-viewpoint views the person as a rational moral agent ‘whose actions derive from his beliefs and desires and reflect his intentions and motives’ (Gill 1986: 251–73). This viewpoint, with its strong moralistic

<sup>1</sup> Those who regard Nicodemus as ambiguous include: Bassler 1989: 635–46; Moloney 1999: 97–110; Hunn 2004: 15–25. Negative with regard to Nicodemus are: Goulder 1991: 153–68; Nissen 1993: 121–38; O’Day 1988: 53–66; Pazdan 1987: 145–8; Sylva 1998: 148–51; Williford 1999: 451–61. Positive readings may be found in: Cantwell 1980: 481–6; Kitzberger 2000: 387–411; Munro 1995: 710–28; Whitters 1998: 422–7.

bent, focuses on a person as a possessor of particular traits. It is by far the most common approach taken when interpreting ancient Greek plays. The personality-viewpoint is less evaluative and more inclusive of a person's irrationality and unpredictability. This viewpoint 'is concerned rather to respond to the unique actuality of his psychological identity and experience, either to share his own special point of view (to empathize with him) or to understand the roots of that point of view' (Gill 1986: 254). Some works of fiction, according to Gill, call us to use either one or the other viewpoint, and some both. After addressing Shakespeare and Flaubert, Gill turns to his own particular area of interest, tragic drama of the fifth century BCE:

The viewpoint of a play emerges from the totality, and interplay, of its various components. These could be formalized as overt statement (what figures say about themselves and each other), implicit statement (innuendoes and implications within these overt statements, or in the imagery and word-play of the language in general), and, broadly, action (physical actions, including gesture and movement, as well as the development of events within the play). [Gill 1986: 255–6]

If Gill is correct, then we must attend closely to language, word-play (much of this occurs in John 3), and action in the Nicodemus material.

To be sure, the narrator of the Fourth Gospel can evince the character-viewpoint, as evident in the Fourth Evangelist's approach to Judas Iscariot. Gill writes:

Associated with the character-viewpoint, for instance, we should expect statements concerning the motivation and assessment of deliberate actions; in particular, explicit accounts of motives and grounds for deliberate choice (in which the agent expresses his character), and equally explicit, 'judicial' assessment of the quality of those actions, and of the qualities those actions highlight in the choosing agent. [1986: 256]

Seasoned Johannine readers will recall John 12:4–6: 'But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)'

So, the Fourth Gospel does employ character-viewpoint in presenting Judas. The ongoing puzzle of Nicodemus derives, in part, from the assumption that the narrator uses *only* the character-viewpoint and the desire, then, to fit Nicodemus into that schema (Staley 1988; Staley 1991).

I would argue, instead, that the author of the Fourth Gospel, like many ancient playwrights, *first* presents Nicodemus from a character-viewpoint (John 3) and *then* moves to a personality-viewpoint (John 7 and 19). Gill argues:

One pattern can be discerned which seems to fit a number of plays. The play begins by giving some kind of swift evaluative ‘placing’ of the central figures . . . But the play, as it proceeds, complicates and partly undermines this perspective, leading us to a less evaluative view and providing a quite different kind of psychological insight from that which informed our original appraisal. In some cases, the process is gradual and continual. [1986: 269–70]

### Encountering Nicodemus encountering Jesus: John 3

John 2 ends on a decidedly negative note. The ominous use of ἄνθρωπος in 2:25 to refer to one unworthy of Jesus’ trust casts suspicion on Nicodemus, the next ἄνθρωπος to appear in the text. Nicodemus is immediately identified with two groups previously introduced, the Pharisees and οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι;<sup>2</sup> in John 1 the terms are practically synonymous. Are these groups positive or negative indicators? Let us review.

John 1:11 declares that the Logos εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον. Surely the reader would consider a ‘ruler of the Jews’, as the narrator calls Nicodemus, to be among Jesus’ ἴδιοι. John 1:12–13 intersects with [chapter 3](#) as well. First, we see that much depends on receiving (λαμβάνω) Jesus; those who receive him prosper (1:12, 16); those who do not, do not. John 3 repeatedly raises the question of receiving Jesus (3:11, 27, 32, 33). In 3:11, Jesus declares to Nicodemus (but in the second-person plural): καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἡμῶν οὐ λαμβάνετε. Secondly, those who receive Jesus have an unusual birth experience. Jesus gives them power to become children of God, not by entering their mother’s womb a second time (as Nicodemus will assume) or any other kind of earthly process (see Jesus’ reprimand about focusing on earthly things instead of heavenly things); rather, those who receive (λαμβάνω) him and believe (πιστεύω) in his name are born of God (ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν; 1:12–13).

The narrative proper begins in 1:19 where we learn that οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι have the authority to send priests and Levites from Jerusalem to Bethany to question John the Baptist. Οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι (equated with the Pharisees in

<sup>2</sup> I leave οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι untranslated in order to indicate the perennial problems associated with the phrase.

v. 24) represent a power structure in which Nicodemus participates. The fact that John the Baptist tells these priests and Levites (and, by extension, οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι and the Pharisees) that they do not know (οἶδα, v. 26) reminds the reader of 1:11 and suggests a negative assessment of these character groups. On the other hand, in 1:31 John the Baptist indicates that he baptizes for the express benefit of Israel, which seems to bode well for Nicodemus, the Teacher of Israel.

In the story of John the Baptist's disciples following Jesus, the narrator presents the first example of model discipleship: John's disciples call Jesus 'Rabbi' (which the narrator tells us is translated διδάσκαλος, 1:38). They personally encounter him and abide (μένω) with him. They come to believe that Jesus is Messiah (Μεσσίας, χριστός), testify to others, and bring them to Jesus to have their own encounter with him.

After Jesus gathers these disciples, the reader learns that Jesus desires to enter Galilee. In the Fourth Gospel, Galilee is a safe place for Jesus where he enjoys success; Jerusalem serves as the antithesis. By the end of [chapter 1](#), then, the reader learns (a) what disciples of Jesus do (follow and testify) and (b) what they call Jesus: Lamb, Rabbi, Messiah, King of Israel. Jesus, a reliable character, calls himself Son of Man. Nathanael calls him Son of God, reflecting the perspective of the narrator in the Prologue. Nathanael, the first to be called an Israelite, also represents John the Baptist's contention that Jesus was to be made manifest to *Israel*. Jesus will stingingly address Nicodemus as The Teacher of Israel, a nearly unbearable irony for the reader.

What expectations about Nicodemus might [chapter 2](#) contribute? The narrator again accentuates Galilee's positivity as opposed to Jerusalem's hostility, and οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι who function powerfully there. In 2:18–22, we again encounter οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in their interrogating role: 'What sign will you give us?' (as if they are owed a sign). Jesus adopts metaphorical speech; they misunderstand and operate at a literal level. Jesus does not deign to explain to them; rather the reader learns from the narrator what οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι cannot know – he was speaking of the temple of his body. The reader already has far more information than any character except God and Jesus, which she will use to render judgements.

Jesus is somewhat coy or unhelpful to οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι. They ask for a sign; he makes a cryptic statement; they do not understand; Jesus appears to be done with them. But later, in a kind of doublet, when he was among the Jerusalemites for Passover (2:23), many believed in him because of the signs he did. That the signs elicited belief strikes the reader as positive since belief has been presented as of high value. But by the way that πιστεύω is

used, vv. 23–4 unsettle the reader by casting a negative light on those who believe. The Jerusalemites believe (πιστεύω) because of signs; Jesus, for his part, did not entrust (πιστεύω) himself to them because he knew everyone and he needed no one to testify to him about humanity.<sup>3</sup> For he himself constantly knew (διὰ τὸ αὐτὸν γινώσκειν, present articular infinitive) what was in the person.

Clearly, Jesus knows something (that the reader does not know) that makes him unimpressed by the Jerusalemites' belief. For the first time in the narrative, the equation 'those who believe = good; those who do not = bad' does not work. Apparently one can believe without having arrived at the narrator's highest value.

In 3:1 the author uses a copula plus ἄνθρωπος, followed by a descriptor, then the phrase ὄνομα αὐτοῦ and a proper name. The fact that the narrator gives this character a proper name should not be glossed over. As Burnett argues, the reader's construction of a character, as the text is actualized, involves inferring traits:

Whether observing real persons or reconstructing a character from a narrative, indicators (acts or words) at different points in the continuum (a person's life or in a text) may cause the inferred patterns of traits to be restructured, thus giving the notion of variation or 'individuality' . . . A character, then, is a paradigm of constructed traits that the reader attaches to a name. The proper name, especially in 'classical' texts like the Gospels, becomes the crucial factor in the construction of a character, but it also allows the character to transcend the text by helping to create the illusion of individuality or 'personality' for the reader. [Burnett 1993: 17]

This emphasis on Nicodemus's individuality and, somewhat, his personality, is important to highlight. What if, rather than functioning merely as a type, Nicodemus is experienced as an individual who shares some traits with a larger group, but is not simply coterminous with it? Perhaps the narrator demonstrates the traits that Nicodemus shares with the groups to which he belongs precisely in order to highlight, later in the narrative, the ways that Nicodemus *differs* from those groups, thereby destabilizing the reader's initial assumptions and complexifying him?

The narrator does not identify Jesus' specific location. Presumably he is alone. Nicodemus makes a statement to Jesus, calling him 'Teacher' twice in one sentence and in two languages. He then claims to know (οἶδαμεν) two things, one about Jesus' identity (you are a teacher sent by God) and

<sup>3</sup> This datum harkens back to the Prologue since everything that came into being came into being through him.

one about his deeds (no one can do the signs you are doing unless God is with him). The reader is immediately suspicious on two counts: (1) the narrator has indicated, through John the Baptist, that οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι and the Pharisees do not know Jesus and (2) chapter 2 casts a negative light on οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι who believe on account of signs, a subject upon which Nicodemus immediately focuses.

Nicodemus's motive for approaching Jesus is not at all clear. For his part, Jesus does not respond as to whether he is sent by God and does not speak about his signs. Rather, he turns from his identity and deeds to Nicodemus. Does Nicodemus want to see the kingdom of God? Because Jesus has an omniscient perspective and speaks for the narrator's highest values, the reader learns that the ability to see the kingdom of God is of utmost value. Jesus points Nicodemus away from the signs and toward what the signs indicate – the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus has spoken of what Jesus is able (δύναται) to do, albeit indirectly, saying, 'No one can do these things unless God is with him', assuming that God is with Jesus because he is able to do these things. Jesus adopts this third-person language to talk about the actions of other people; solemnly (ἀμὴν ἀμὴν) he declares that 'Unless a person (τις) be born from above, he will not be able (δύναται) to see the kingdom of God' (3:3).

Nicodemus does not ask what Jesus means by 'kingdom of God'. He does, however, latch on to the ἄνωθεν language, whose ambiguity allows Nicodemus to pursue the wrong trajectory. Missing the 'above' signification, Nicodemus pursues the question of being able (δύναται) to be born again. He redundantly blathers with two sentences about being birthed a second time (using δεύτερον, not ἄνωθεν). Nicodemus does not ask questions that bespeak a serious ability to engage in spiritual matters such as, 'Where is the kingdom and what do you mean by "see it"?' or 'Say more about what you mean by ἄνωθεν.' He uses Jesus' language (δύναται), but not productively.

Rather than supply Nicodemus with insider information, which the reader already knows, Jesus makes another parallel solemn proclamation:

John 3:5 Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἔξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, οὐ δύναται εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ.

In saying this, Jesus logically equates being 'born from above' with being 'born from water and spirit'; he also equates seeing the kingdom of God with entering it. This is made clear by recalling v. 3, which parallels v. 5:

John 3:3 Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν, οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ.

Next, Jesus develops the birth imagery, adding two new, somewhat ambiguous, terms to the conversation: σάρξ and πνεῦμα. He claims:

τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τῆς σαρκὸς σὰρξ ἐστὶν  
καὶ τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος πνεῦμά ἐστὶν [3:6]

The word ‘flesh’ occurs only once before, at 1:14: ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο. Since 1:14 states that the Word was not born from the flesh but becomes flesh, it is not clear what value the narrator places on flesh.<sup>4</sup>

Πνεῦμά first appears in the narrative when John speaks of the spirit descending upon Jesus (1:32). By 1:33 then, the reader sees that Jesus consists of flesh and spirit. But the statement in 3:6 appears to pit flesh against spirit. The reader associates being born from the spirit as synonymous with seeing/entering the kingdom of God.

Jesus next commands Nicodemus: ‘Do not marvel that I said to you, “it is necessary for you (plural) to be born from above (v. 7)”’. The command not to marvel implies either that Jesus has just said something that would make any person marvel or that Nicodemus is particularly susceptible to marvelling. Perhaps the reader is supposed to picture Nicodemus with a look of marvel on his face. At any rate, Jesus’ commanding tone and repetition draws attention to the utmost importance of the statement about being born from above.

Note that Jesus actually misquotes himself in v. 7. Earlier (v. 3) he uses a conditional sentence: ‘*unless* someone (τις) is born from above he will not be able to see the kingdom of God’. In v. 7, he makes a declarative statement: ‘*You must* be born from above.’ Jesus makes these statements synonymous with each other. The ὑμᾶς must refer to the groups that Nicodemus represents, namely the Pharisees/οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, implying that, currently, these characters have not entered the kingdom of God. They think that they are God’s children because of their birth into a certain people, proleptically anticipating the claim of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in [chapter 8](#) to a relationship with God based on genetic pedigree: ‘We have Abraham as our Father.’

After commanding Nicodemus and his ilk to be born from above/see and enter the kingdom of God, Jesus moves the conversation to Nicodemus personally by using the second-person singular (ἄκούεις). Nicodemus hears (the spirit spiring where it wishes), but does not know (its source or destination). Source and destination are among this narrator’s fundamental categories; considerable attention is devoted to where Jesus is from and where he is going.

<sup>4</sup> The only other place it appears is 6:51–63, three times.

Building logically on his statement, Jesus declares: οὕτως ἐστὶν πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος (3:8). But to what does the οὕτως refer? Nicodemus clearly is not one of those people, at least not yet. It must mean that everyone born of the spirit *does* know the origin and destination of the spirit. But how? Presumably one must proceed with the narrative attuned to ascertaining this crucial information.

The reader imagines many questions that Nicodemus might have asked, such as, ‘Define what you mean by flesh, spirit, kingdom of God, born from above, born from water and from spirit.’ Or, ‘Why did you move from speaking about people in general (τις), to you plural (ὕμᾱς), to me personally?’ Instead, Nicodemus rebuffs Jesus’ attempt at a personal encounter and invitation to consider his own status vis-à-vis the kingdom and steers the conversation back to a vague, general question: Πῶς δύνανται ταῦτα γενέσθαι (3:9). It seems that Nicodemus is either (a) incapable of deeper conversation, at least momentarily; (b) cynical and dismissive of Jesus’ viewpoint; (c) concerned about what it might cost him to break formation with his group, given his elevated social status; or (d) some combination of the above. Jesus next judges Nicodemus and then ends the personal encounter.

Using a descriptor which Nicodemus earlier used of him (3:2), Jesus ironically asks: Σὺ εἶ ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ καὶ ταῦτα οὐ γινώσκεις; Jesus accuses Nicodemus of habitual ignorance. The reader understands that knowing is a key virtue for the narrator, so this is quite a damning verdict which, presumably, inspires the reader to keep reading in order to discover more about ταῦτα. The narrator introduced Nicodemus as a Pharisee, a ruler of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, but Jesus calls him ‘*the* Teacher of Israel’. If *the* teacher does not know, then Israel is also implicated in the habitual ignorance. Dodd accounts for this tension by ascribing the *Sitz im Leben* of the Fourth Gospel to ‘controversy with the Jews’.

In v. 11, Jesus identifies Nicodemus and himself as belonging to different groups:

*We* **know** about what *we* speak and **testify** about what *we* have seen  
But, *you* [pl] do not accept *our* testimony.

The reader knows that Jesus’ viewpoint is trustworthy and that knowing and testifying to what one has seen constitute high values for the narrator. Already, verbs of ‘knowing’ have appeared thirteen times and ‘seeing’ nineteen times. The καὶ, which should be taken adversatively since it was just used that way in the preceding verse, expands the gap. Jesus places Nicodemus in the group of ‘you who do not accept (λαμβάνω) our

testimony'. Here the reader hears the apparent death-knell of 1:11; Nicodemus exemplifies one of Jesus' own who did not accept him. He also represents the uncomprehending darkness. Or does he?

Space does not permit a detailed analysis of the heavenly things that Jesus addresses, so I will summarize. First, Jesus is the Son of Man who, paradoxically, is both godly and fleshly, heavenly and earthly. Even while on earth, he remains from above; presumably the reader should want to participate somehow in that paradoxical existence. Secondly, not only is the Human Son heavenly, he must also be lifted up in a way typologically tied to Moses' lifting of the serpent in the wilderness. Unpacking the dense, repetitive, contrastive, purpose-driven cluster of statements in 3:14–18, the reader learns that: (a) Jesus is like the serpent that Moses lifted up, (b) God's son is only-begotten, (c) God gave this only son to grant life and salvation, and (d) the result of all of this relates to judgement.

At this point the reader is presented starkly with the narrator's values. To believe in God's only-begotten son is of utmost value and is rewarded with eternal life, exemption from judgement, and salvation. Unbelievers are judged and perish. One is judged based on one's stance towards believing or not believing in Jesus. This is the plot of the Fourth Gospel. The terms of judgement (3:19–21) are not new for the reader, though they are for Nicodemus. The reader knows from the Prologue that Jesus is the light and that the darkness did not comprehend the light, nor did Jesus' own receive him. But now Jesus, the omniscient protagonist, explains why this is the case: their deeds were evil. This does not present Nicodemus in the best light.

Thus concludes Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. From a character-viewpoint, Nicodemus serves a didactic function for the reader as the author encourages her towards virtue (as defined by the narrator) and away from vice. Beyond his didactic function, Nicodemus is a cipher.

There is no reason to discount that the character-viewpoint is partially at work in this narrative. But the personality-viewpoint should also be brought to bear. Again, if Nicodemus serves solely as a cipher, why depict him so specifically and provide him with a proper name? Why does the reader simultaneously: (a) side with the narrator's values and, therefore, judge Nicodemus's behaviour as wanting at best, and (b) feel somewhat sorry for him since he does not receive the depth of information that the reader has? The sympathy stems, in part, from the gaps in the narrative that spark the reader's imagination about what the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus did or did not entail. Nicodemus has been put in a position of choice and, this time, does not choose well. Given another

chance he may. In this way, Nicodemus approximates a real person more than a type, a personality and not just a character. If he is so hopeless, why does he appear twice more in the narrative, acting with some degree of positive regard for Jesus? I suggest this is best explained if we consider that Nicodemus remains in Jesus' hearing at least until 3:21; he is drawn to a relationship with Jesus that he will struggle with throughout the narrative, causing him to see himself as an individual able to differentiate himself from his 'natural' group. Given his status, this process must be a frightening, potentially cataclysmic proposition. Nicodemus ponders all these things in his heart until we meet him again in [chapter 7](#). And the narrator, for his part, begins to show that, like Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus, he can evince in one text *both* a character-viewpoint *and* a personality-viewpoint.

### Differentiating from the group, becoming a person: John 7

Based on their experience of Nicodemus from the encounter in [chapter 3](#), as well as how subsequent characters have been read, the reader is shocked to encounter Nicodemus again in [chapter 7](#) and immediately wonders: 'What is he doing here? I thought he perfectly failed to respond to Jesus. Will things turn out differently this time?'<sup>5</sup>

[Chapter 7](#) commences with Jesus' brothers imploring him to go to Judea, although the narrator has just cued the reader that Judea could be deadly for Jesus (7:1). Somewhat oddly, the reason given is: ἵνα καὶ οἱ μαθηταὶ σου θεωρήσουσιν σοῦ τὰ ἔργα ἃ ποιεῖς (v. 3). Do disciples only reside in Judea? Is this a reference to 1:11, which depicts Jesus coming unto his own? The brothers imply that as long as he remains outside of Judea, Jesus' works are secret; they want him to go public: φανέρωσον σεαυτὸν τῷ κόσμῳ. They imagine, then, that Judea is somehow equivalent to the world (κόσμος). The reader recalls [chapter 3](#) where the narrator indicates that God so loved the world that God sent his only Son so that believers might inherit life. Here in [chapter 7](#) Jesus states that this world returns God's love with hate because its works are evil, reminding the reader of Jesus' comments in 3:19–20.

At 7:10 Jesus goes to Judea for the Festival of Booths. Though Nicodemus is not named until 7:45, one imagines him taking up residence in the story at 7:11 where οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι appear. The characters become confusing

<sup>5</sup> Space does not permit a close reading of the material between [chs. 3](#) and [7](#), which only then would allow the reader to fully actualize the text in [ch. 7](#).

here since it is difficult to draw bold lines between ‘οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι’ and ‘the crowd’ (ὁ ὄχλος). While the crowds are divided as to whether Jesus is ‘good’ or ‘deceptive’, ‘no one (οὐδεὶς) would speak openly about him for fear of the Jews’ (v. 13).

Jerusalemites (Ἱεροσολυμίται) are introduced as a character in this narrative at 7:25. They, too, deliberate Jesus’ identity and his relationship with the authorities (ἄρχοντες, v. 26). Here the reader recalls the identification of Nicodemus as an ἄρχων of the Jews in [chapter 3](#). This somewhat separates him from the crowds, οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, and the Jerusalemites. He has power, status, and clout. The question could not be more pointed for Nicodemus: μήποτε ἀληθῶς ἔγνωσαν οἱ ἄρχοντες ὅτι οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ χριστός (v. 26b). Jesus’ ensuing statements hearken back to the Prologue and its information about Jesus’ origin (1:11, 51). In v. 30, ‘they’ (ἐζήτουν) try to arrest him.

The Pharisees (of which Nicodemus was named in [chapter 3](#)) appear in 7:32 discerning the pulse of the crowd. Consequently, they join forces with the chief priests (ἀρχιερεῖς) and send the temple police (ὑπηρέται) to arrest Jesus. They fail. The narrator heightens the drama in v. 37 and sets a new but related scene, by highlighting the time frame: the last day of the festival, the great day. Jesus adduces some LXX text with reference to himself, causing yet another round of division among the crowd.<sup>6</sup>

Another scene arises in v. 45 when the apostolic temple police return without Jesus, to the disdain of the chief priests and Pharisees. The police speak of Jesus’ charisma and the Pharisees rail against them and the crowd as accused and ignorant of the law.

At v. 50, Nicodemus steps forward. The tension is high for the reader, who hopes that Nicodemus will defend Jesus since the narrator points to a pre-existing relationship by the use of the phrase ὁ . . . πρότερον. He has the best chance of speaking truth to power since the narrator explicitly states that Nicodemus was εἷς ὢν ἐξ αὐτῶν. Instead of making an undaunted case, Nicodemus tries to make his point in the form of a question: ‘Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing . . . does it?’ The Samaritan woman also used μή in her ‘proclamation’ of Jesus as the Messiah (μήτι, 4:29). However, in that particular case her risk and proclamation were ultimately fruitful. Nicodemus’s situation is dramatically different. He cowers before his colleagues who shut him down and put him in his place by Bible-thumping. There is a devastating lack of response from Nicodemus at this point; when called upon to choose

<sup>6</sup> Which LXX text/s is not clear; cf. Brown 1966: 321–3.

between being a Judean or a Galilean, he becomes silent. Their response is quite a *non sequitur*; Nicodemus appeals to the law and his colleagues move to *ad hominem* attack. Nicodemus neither cries ‘Foul’ nor brings the discussion back to the law. He acts out of fear, the reader is to assume, as do those mentioned in 7:13.

What should the reader make of Nicodemus here? This narrator is quite capable of ascribing damning motives to Jesus’ opponents (e.g. those seeking to kill him in [chapter 5](#)); yet the narrator renders no evaluation of Nicodemus. If the character-viewpoint were at work, one would expect some overt judgement about Nicodemus, such that the reader might derive a clear moral lesson. Could it be that, instead, Gill’s personality-viewpoint is, in effect, inviting the reader to ponder Nicodemus as a person? As in [chapter 3](#), the narrator again carefully shows that Nicodemus belongs to a particular social group, and his encounter with Jesus places him in a precarious position vis-à-vis his own group. He belongs to the educated elite who make things happen. The reader can feel their stomach tighten and throat dry up as Nicodemus is put on the spot and must decide whether or not to do the reckless, if right, thing. Will he risk his social position for Jesus’ sake based on his limited knowledge of Jesus? At this point in the story, Nicodemus has no idea that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus has done signs and made certain claims, claims which someone like the Samaritan woman, socially speaking, has little to lose if she accepts.

Gill’s comment about some of Sophocles’ tragic heroes applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the reader’s experience of Nicodemus:

in these cases, one feels inclined to say that the act is right ‘for them’, but not right by any universal standard. We understand why these figures . . . feel they must do these things. We follow the ‘logic’ with which the figures explain . . . that these acts seem right and reasonable to them. But this does not mean that we should feel confident about describing the acts as right and the people as good in some absolute way. Rather we follow the play’s invitation to share, temporarily at least, the . . . figure’s world-view . . . [1986: 267]

### Action calls to action: John 19

Nicodemus appears explicitly one last time in chapter 19. There is no reason to assume that he is not part of the dramatic trial and crucifixion narrated in chapters 18–19. But 19:38–42 forms a small pericope, which the narrator sets off with the phrase ‘after these things’. For the first time we meet Joseph and learn several facts. First, he is from Arimathea. As frequently happens in the

Fourth Gospel, the character is tied to a city of origin (often with characters who exhibit faith; Nicodemus is not given a city). Secondly, Joseph is a disciple (μαθητής). Thirdly, he is afraid of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι so he keeps his discipleship secret, distinguishing him from others who are labelled as afraid of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι but are not denominated μαθητής. Fourthly, Joseph asks Pilate for Jesus' body, which strikes the reader as bold. It would seem that Joseph acts against his fear. Surely, word would spread quickly that he had done so and blow his cover, so to speak. Surprisingly, Pilate consents. This strikes the reader as odd since Pilate was presented in intricate, specific ways throughout chapters 18–19, and here he simply co-operates. The reader expects some comment from Pilate, but receives none. Pilate served his narrative purpose and the focus is on Joseph. Or is it?

It is difficult to know whether or not the Synoptics count as an extra text for the reader of the Fourth Gospel. Joseph appears in each of the Synoptics. All three identify his city. Matthew calls him rich (27:57). Mark paints the lushest picture, calling him 'a respected member of the council and who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God' (15:43). Luke also comments on his waiting expectantly. He adds that he was 'a good and righteous man . . . who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action' (23:51).

Most of what the narrator of the Fourth Gospel says about Joseph, then, apart from the crypto-Christian line, appears in the tradition. Decisively different is the inclusion of Nicodemus as Joseph's companion. In characterizing Nicodemus at this juncture, the narrator first and foremost refers to Nicodemus as originally coming to Jesus by night. Nicodemus keeps coming, as the repeated use of forms of ἐρχομαι indicates. Already the reader wishes that Nicodemus had acted in public with Joseph. But it appears to be a continuing feature of Nicodemus that he acts in the dark. His desire to treat Jesus' body with spices related to burial is admirable; one only wishes that he had not waited to act until Jesus was dead. Given what Mary did in [chapter 12](#) by anointing, the reader is even more disappointed at an opportunity lost. Nicodemus, different from Thomas who doubted, does not receive a post-resurrection appearance. Joseph of Arimathea, though he was afraid, acts with some boldness and is called a disciple. Nicodemus is not explicitly named as such.

But what if Nicodemus's last appearance in the Fourth Gospel functions in the way that Rhoads and Michie suggest for Mark 16:8 (Rhoads and Michie 1982)? That is, what if the open-endedness or lack of closure is a rhetorical technique that invites the reader to imagine the narrative time extending beyond the Gospel and directly into the reader's own life?

## Summary

Interpretations that rely solely on a character-viewpoint bring too little clarity concerning the ‘lesson’ the reader is to learn from Nicodemus. This problem is indicated, for example, when Bassler notes about Nicodemus’s response to Jesus in [chapter 3](#): ‘If . . . Nicodemus’s profession of faith seems to be acceptable within the framework of this Gospel, Jesus’ response to Nicodemus seems to indicate that on another level *inaccessible to the reader* it is *not acceptable*’ (1989: 637). If the lesson is inaccessible to the reader, I contend that it is a patently ineffective lesson.

Bassler’s essay is replete with the language of character-viewpoint. Throughout she uses evaluative language and assumes that Nicodemus must ‘represent’ something, if only ‘ambiguity’:

In short, then, ambiguity is that which attracted our attention to Nicodemus in the first place, that which set him apart from other more clearly defined figures in the narrative, and that which keeps us actively engaged in the quest for meaning in this Gospel. By the same token, however, ambiguity lends a complexity and depth to this figure, which suggests, it seems to me, a more than passing interest on the part of the author of and community behind this Gospel in *whomever* or *whatever Nicodemus represents* [my emphasis]. [1989: 644]

I mention Bassler’s article not because I find it particularly wanting, but, on the contrary, because I find it among the very best of the ‘character-viewpoint’ interpretations. And even though Bassler emphasizes the ambiguity and elusive nature of what Nicodemus represents, she insists in the end on narrowing the ambiguity to one trait: ‘marginality’.

Could it be, then, that there is more to Nicodemus than the representative character-viewpoint allows? What if Nicodemus is less of a problem to be solved, or a character to be resolved, than a personality to be experienced as described by Gill? Nicodemus shares some traits with the groups of which he is a part; yet he is not coterminous with them, even standing over against them at times. He is an individual with traits. What Burnett says of Peter in Matthew applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel: ‘There are, however, several textual indicators, or techniques of characterization, that allow the reader to transform Peter [read, Nicodemus] momentarily into an individual who transcends his typical function as a member of the disciples [read, Pharisees, *οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι*]’ (Burnett 1993: 20).

Granting Nicodemus a proper name constructs him as a personage in a clearer, stronger way. The fact that he appears, named, three times

strengthens that experience. As Burnett says of Peter so the reader can say of Nicodemus, 'There is no closure for the reader' (1993: 20). The reader does not know what happens and this indeterminacy creates a gap that the reader is invited to fill. So, Nicodemus is an open-ended character.

It seems that there is something about Nicodemus's social, religious, political status that makes it hard for him to cross over. Nicodemus, then, might be read differently by readers of different social locations. Perhaps the poor, marginalized reader would identify with the Samaritan woman or the blind man and take a certain glee in the educated, high-status character not 'getting it'. But the educated, high-status reader with much to lose in terms of social standing by following Jesus might find the character of Nicodemus true to their own situation. I find the various, opposing reactions to Nicodemus among readers, scholarly or otherwise, fascinating. As Burnett says, 'It is precisely this kind of . . . indeterminacy that helps to create the illusion that names refer to something independent of texts, and it helps to support the illusion of the non-textuality of characters. The text has a beginning and an ending, and is thus closed, but the reader is encouraged to speculate beyond the ending of the text' (1993: 20).

Nicodemus should be considered a 'major' character, since he punctuates the Gospel regularly. If the reader easily discerns that they should follow characters who represent the narrator's values (believing; publicly testifying on behalf of and inviting others to encounter Jesus; loving; transforming) and avoid thinking and behaving like the characters who represent that which the narrator rejects (denial, betrayal, fear), then Nicodemus should *not* be considered a representative figure. Rather, he may be the character with whom the reader *most* identifies since he conveys potential; the reader wants Nicodemus to make the right choice, to identify himself with Jesus, but they also understand that he has much more to lose than (for example) the Samaritan woman. He is a complex character with high social status. The reader turns him round and round like a prism, seeing the different angles and, in doing so, catches perhaps a glimpse of the complexity of their own motives and the potential cost of following Jesus.

No character resists closure more than Nicodemus. Most characters are tidily dealt with and are models for good or ill. Even Peter, who denies Jesus, gets rehabilitated by the end. Nicodemus, on the other hand, functions in the Fourth Gospel much as the women function in Mark 16:8. It is the very lack of closure that grips the reader and makes them, finally, 'mind the gap' between Nicodemus and closure. They will, God willing, assume the role of Nicodemus and walk through the resurrection

appearances in chapters 19–21, deciding finally to commit to the risen Son of God in the way they/Nicodemus could not or would not commit to the pre-resurrected Jesus. In that way, they may finally move from having their mind on earthly things (power, status, fear, shame) to heavenly things (Christ, the Father, birth from above). Jesus asks Nicodemus, ‘How can you understand heavenly things if you do not understand earthly things?’ The answer is: the narrative of the Fourth Gospel. Nicodemus (and the reader) needs the whole story, through chapter 21, to understand, much like the disciples needed the whole story, as the narrator indicates in 2:22.

If Nicodemus must represent or typify someone or something, then let it be all of the so-called ‘minor’ characters in the Fourth Gospel who have received short shrift by having their personalities reduced to a mere ‘lesson’, moral or otherwise. Let him represent the real complexity that characterizes the life of any real reader.

### *Compared with Dodd*

In the end, where Dodd inchoately refers to Nicodemus as a *dramatis persona*, I see him as a *dramatis persona*-lity. While Dodd anticipated, and in some ways catalysed, the kind of study I have conducted in this essay, in other ways we differ. In considering the relationship between narrative and history in interpreting the Fourth Gospel, I agree with Dodd that attention to history is important. Obviously there were Pharisees, chief priests, Ἰουδαῖοι, and a Jesus of Nazareth who caused division. The Gospel was composed for an audience, and understanding the nature of that audience and their relationship to the parent tradition matters. Like Dodd, I find the notion of a Hellenistic audience useful.

However, Dodd’s primary focus upon form criticism, source criticism, and a fixed literary text does not allow Nicodemus to reach his full potential as a character in the author’s dramatic narrative. In Dodd’s system, he can never break out of an incidental role. We learn only that he may or may not be a historical figure, much like Nathaniel. His presence in the narrative simply evinces the *Sitz im Leben* of Christian controversy with its parent tradition. But this reading is too ‘flat’ to account for all the evidence related to Nicodemus.

The productive new lines of enquiry opened by those attending to the oral performances of texts and the role of social memory hold far more promise for actualizing a character like Nicodemus than do the approaches known to Dodd, which, for all of their ingenuity and presage, did not allow for the complexity and ambiguity available to modern and

postmodern exegetes. It is often the case that the characters I would consider ‘marginalized’ by Dodd’s methods have been studied and interpreted for us by those considered ‘marginalized’ by society. Queer readings of Lazarus, feminist readings of Mary Magdalene, post-colonial readings of the *Pericope Adulterae*, womanist readings and the application of disability theory to the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel – all of these have caused us to better potentiate the presence of figures previously minimized (including Mary, Martha, Lazarus, the Samaritan woman, and Mary Magdalene). I appreciate and am indebted to Dodd’s work, as are all Johannine scholars. But perhaps what is true about a grain of wheat may be true of certain dated methodologies: ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἐὰν μὴ ὁ κόκκος τοῦ σίτου πεσῶν εἰς τὴν γῆν ἀποθάνῃ, αὐτὸς μόνος μένει· ἐὰν δὲ ἀποθάνῃ, πολὺν καρπὸν φέρει (John 12:24).

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