Gospel Doctrine
Lesson: John 3-4
Reading: John 3-4

PDF Version of Notes

I. Approach

These represent the notes I made during my reading of the scriptural text for this lesson. It is not a lesson outline or a lesson plan but really notes about issues and questions that struck me as interesting during my reading. Consequently, the notes do not have a conclusion and very little mention of application. I like to let those things arise while I teach.

II. What Happened in John 2?

The reading for last week's lesson primarily covered Matthew 3-4. The reading included John's preaching, Jesus' baptism, the temptation of Jesus, the start of Jesus' ministry, and the calling of the first disciples.

The reading for this weeks lesson is John 3-4. It is true that John 3-4 narrates events post baptism but I think there are also important events in John 2 that are worth keeping in mind as one reads John 3-4.

- Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding feast (John 2:1-12).
- The cleansing of the temple around the time of Passover (John 2:13-22). John places the cleansing of temple at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) all place it at the end of Jesus' public ministry.
- Also, I think the Nicodemus pericope actually begins at the end of chapter 2.

III. Nicodemus

A. The Beginning of the Nicodemus Pericope

In my view, the Nicodemus pericope actually begins with the last three verses of chapter 2. Read John 2:23-25:

> 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, 25 And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man. (KJV)

> 23 When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. 24 But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people 25 and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone. (NRSV)

- These verses give some nice background. For example, we learn that Jesus is still in Jerusalem because of the Passover.
- Jesus has recently cleansed the temple according to John, and performed miracles (observed by many). One of these miracles is the semi-public turning of water into wine, but the text certainly seems to suggest that many miracles have been performed.
- What is going on here in these verses? What do we learn about at least some of Jesus' followers?
- Verses 24-25 are narrative insertions by John telling us about Jesus' reaction to these followers. What do we learn? What does it mean that "Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men?"
- Is the NRSV helpful here? How would or could Jesus entrust them if they had been ready or worthy to be entrusted?
- Why does Jesus perform miracles given his negative reaction here? Is faith based on his miracles spurious? If it isn't spurious, then is it fair to say that faith based on miracles is superficial?[1]
- What does verse 25 mean? How is it related to verse 24?

B. Nicodemus Visits Jesus at Night

Read John 3:1-2

> 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.

- What do we learn about Nicodemus? Who was he? How would you describe him?
- Do the verses that we just read in chapter 2 help us understand Nicodemus and what he represents a little better?
- Nicodemus means conqueror;[2] it doesn't seem, at least to me, that the name has obvious symbolic importance. The text tells us that he is a pharisee and a "ruler of the Jews." The

[1] Kieffer, Rene, 2001, "John" in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 966.

[2] "Nicodemus" A Dictionary of First Names. Patrick Hanks, Kate Hardcastle, and Flavia Hodges. Oxford University Press, 2006.

phrase "ruler of the Jews" may indicate that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin, at this time, was a ruling assembly comprised of 70 members from three groups: the chief priests, elders, and scribes. Some of the scribes were also pharisees.[3]

- I think the important thing here is the Nicodemus represents the urban elite: educated and powerful Jews. But also urban elite that are open to the teachings of Jesus. Furthermore, Nicodemus gets linked with the ending verses of chapter 2: the miracles have convinced him (and presumably others in the urban elite) that Jesus is a teacher from God. Thus it seems like Nicodemus represents the group that Jesus could not entrust himself to.

i. Visiting at Night

Why would Nicodemus visit Jesus at night? Why would John mention that the visit happened at night? What does John want us to understand? Why do you think of each of the following possibilities?

1. *Shame or Embarrassment:* I think many people's reaction is that Nicodemus must of been ashamed or embarrassed to be seen with Jesus. Is shame or embarrassment a theme or part of this narrative?

2. *Dangerous:* This one is closely related to the shame or embarrassment explanation. Jesus did cause quite a scene when He cleansed the temple. It may be problematic/dangerous for a "ruler of the Jews" to be seen with such a "revolutionary."

3. *Nicodemus wanted some alone time:* Another possibility is that Nicodemus wanted to be able to discuss things without interruption, and night might have been the only time that this could be easily accomplished. It certainly seems likely that Jesus would have been very busy (particularly in light of the fact that He had recently performed many miracles.)

4. *Symbolic Message to the Reader:* John doesn't have to mention that Nicodemus visited at night. John clearly wants the reader to know it happened at night. Certainly, the imaginary of darkness is apt here: Nicodemus truly is in the dark from a metaphorical point of view (and so is the rest of urban elite in Jerusalem). Think, John 11:10:

> 10 But if a man walk in the night, he stumbleth, because there is no light in him.

ii. The Question

What is Nicodemus' question to Jesus?

- Why doesn't Nicodemus' explicitly ask a question?
- Based on his approach and speech to Jesus, what is Nicodemus' implicit question?

[3] Kieffer, Rene, 2001, "John" in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 966.

C. Born Again

Read John 3:3-8:

> 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. 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? 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. 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.

- Focusing on the text, What does Jesus here in these verses teach us about what it means to be *born again?*
- What other scriptures or stories come to mind when you think of the phrase *born again?*
- Does Jesus' response in verse 3 help us understand the purpose of the visit by Nicodemus? What words or part of Nicodemus' statement is Jesus responding to?
- Do you think the sub-text is something like, "I am going to teach you what it means for something to be from or of God?"
- Do you think Jesus is suggesting that you can't really understand his mission and in what sense he is a teacher from God unless you are born again?
- Do you think that Jesus' response is linked with the final verses of chapter 2?
- In the end of chapter 2, we find out that Jesus could not *trust* the people who followed him because they observed him performing miracles. How is this concept of *being born again* linked to Jesus being able to *trust* or *entrust* these followers? How is it related to *seeing* or *entering* the Kingdom of God?

i. Amen, Amen

Malina and Rohrbaugh, in their cultural anthropological commentary on the gospel of John, give the following background for the phrase, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee:"[4]

> The phrase "Amen, Amen, I say to you" (NRSV: Very truly, I tell you) is extremely frequent in this Gospel, appearing 25 times . . . The formula means something like,

[4]Malina, Bruce J. and Richard Rohrbaugh, 1998, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Fortress Press, 81.

> "I give you my word of honor." In effect it is an oath, explicitly and publicly giving one's word of honor concerning the veracity of what one is saying. It is not unlike swearing on a Bible in U.S. court. In Mediterranean societies putting one's honor on the line is a very serious matter.

- Does the preceding affect how you read these verses?
- Does it affect how you understand the interaction between Jesus and Nicodemus?

ii. Born from Above

Commentators note that Jesus' comment involves a play on an ambiguous Greek word:[5]

> Like the English phrase "from the top," the Greek means both "again" (as when a conductor says: "Take it from the top") and "from above" (as when a furniture mover tell his crew: "Take it from the top").

- Thus, we could read rewrite verse 3 as the following:

> 1. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto
>
> thee, Except a man be born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

- Do you think *born from above* works better in this passage than *born again?*
- Which phrase does the surrounding context suggest is the right understanding? Does the ambiguous nature of the word help explain the puzzled reaction of Nicodemus in verse 4?
- Could it be both? Could it be important to recognize that we are talking about both being *born again* and being *born from above?*

iii. The Response of Nicodemus

In verse 4, What do we learn about Nicodemus? Does Nicodemus' response make sense to you given that this appears to an unfamiliar concept for him?

- As a member of the elite in Jerusalem, would the idea of rebirth have been particularly troubling to Nicodemus?
- Cultural anthropologist note that Jesus lived in a honor/shame society and that birth status was, to a large extent, the single factor that determined a person's honor rating. The

[5] Malina, Bruce J. and Richard Rohrbaugh, 1998, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Fortress Press, 81.

honor status of a child was always the same as the family in which he or she was born.[6] Thus being *born again* or *born from above* has the potential to dramatically alter the honor status of a person. Is this cultural backdrop important? Does it help us understand why this discussion is so difficult for Nicodemus? How would Nicodemus' world change if he accepted the message of Jesus?

- Given the cultural backdrop, what does a phrase like *born from above* imply?
- Does the cultural backdrop of a honor/shame society suggest that there was something socially radical about the message of Jesus?
- Does the response by Nicodemus help you understand why Jesus could not "entrust" (John 2:23-25) Nicodemus and the group that he figuratively represents?

iv. Baptism

- I think most Mormons equate the water with baptism in verse 5. However, another interpretation is that "water" refers to human birth and "the spirit" refers to being born again. Just looking at the text, which reading do you think fits better?
- Why is baptism an important part of being born again or being born from above? Why is a public act an important part of being born again? Or is it important that it is a public act?
- Remember, the backdrop for this is from the end of chapter 2 where we are informed that Jesus could not trust or entrust the people. Could baptism play a role in the entrusting process?
- In verse 5 is Jesus just reiterating what He said in verse 3? Is there something different about the use of language here in terms of "seeing" and "entering" the Kingdom of God?
- What does it mean to *see the Kingdom of God?* What does it mean to *enter the Kingdom of God?*

D. Explanation of the New Birth

Reread John 3:5-8:

> 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. 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.

[6] Malina, Bruce J. and Richard Rohrbaugh, 1998, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Fortress Press, 82.

- What are verses 6-8 about? What is Jesus trying to teach Nicodemus?
- Why the contrast between the birth of the flesh and the birth of the Spirit in verse 6? Does this comparison give us insight into how being *born again* or *born from above* changes someone?
- What does the short parable in verse 8 mean? Do you see a link between the the Spirit and the wind?
- Commentators note that that verse 8 includes a play on words: the underlying Greek word can mean either "spirit or wind."[7] Is this important background? Does it help you understand why Jesus employs this parable and why it is important?

E. Nicodemus Still in the Dark

Read John 3:9-15

> 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? 11 Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. 12 If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? 13 And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. 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.

- What do we learn from the fact that Nicodemus is still confused? What does it tell us about the nature of being born again? Is it linked to what we learned from the parable in verse 8?
- What does verse 11 imply? Does it imply that Nicodemus should already know about the doctrine of being born again? Where could he have learned it?
- Do you think that Jesus is making a general statement about teachers/leaders? Why is understanding "these things" critical for teachers? Do verses 11 and 12 shed light on what is meant?
- How are verses 11 and 12 connected to Nicodemus' original statement to Jesus in the first two verses of this chapter?
- What are the earthly things in this context? What are the heavenly things? Why must one believe the earthly things first?

[7] Smith, Moody D., 2000, "John" in *HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, Harper & Row, 962.

- To me the earthly things have to be the message of verses 3-8. They don't seem particularly earthy, but it seems that the "earthly things" should refer to something that Jesus has taught Nicodemus and that Nicodemus has not believed (or understood). The only thing that fits that description is the *born again* teachings. In what sense could the born again or birth from above teachings be about earthly things?

- What is verse 13 about and how is it related to the larger discussion with Nicodemus? Is verse 13 a preview or a hint at the heavenly things referred to in verse 12? Is baptism "earthly" compared to the heavenly doctrine of Jesus' relationship with the Father?

- How is the story of Moses and the brass serpent related to the rest of the discussion in these verses? Do you think this would be a particularly useful and relevant analogy for Nicodemus?

IV. Love

Read John 3:16-21:

> 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. 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.

- Is the encounter with Nicodemus over? Is Jesus speaking anymore or is John speaking? If Jesus isn't speaking anymore, when did he stop speaking (verse 16 or even earlier)?

- How are these verses related to the message of being born again and the rest of the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus?

- Is the theme of light and darkness a link back to other parts of the Nicodemus story?

- Is noting that God loves the world radical for the time and place or is world used more narrowly than we usually read it?

- What do these verses teach about judgment/condemnation? When does judgment/condemnation occur?

- What does it mean that "Jesus did not come to condemn the world?" Is John just focusing on the positive? Is John suggesting that condemnation in this context is ultimately self-condemnation?

- This is the first time in the gospel of John that God's love is mentioned. Why is it mentioned here? How does it fit in with the verses the precede it?

V. Parallel Narratives

Some commentators suggest that John 3:1-21 and John 3:22-26 are parallels narratives. These commentators suggest that the encounters in each narrative develop nearly identically. Furthermore, they develop parallel themes focused on Jesus.

For example, the beginning of each narrative can be outlined in parallel as the following:[8]

John 3:1-21	John 3:22-36
1. Occasion	1. Occasion
a) A pharisee	a) A Judean
b) Born of water/spirit	b) Over purification
c) With Jesus	c) With John Disciples
2. Address: "Rabbi . . . "	2. Address: "Rabbi . . . "
. . .	. . .

Also, here is a start of a list of themes that are developed in parallel:[9]

John 3:1-21	John 3:22-36
1. Born from above. (3,7)	1. The one coming from above is above all (31)
2. Jesus the one who came down from the sky (13)	2. Jesus the one who comes down from sky (31)
. . .	. . .

- Do you see these two pericopes as parallel in construction? What are the similarities? Do you see parallel construction and themes? Can you map them out?
- If you do see them as parallel, what do you make of these parallels? Are the parallels important? What do they reveal about John's understanding of Jesus and his mission?
- If you do see them as parallel, do the parallels with the second narrative help you understand the Nicodemus narrative and its message better?

[8]Taken from Malina, Bruce J. and Richard Rohrbaugh, 1998, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Fortress Press, 93.

[9]Taken from Malina, Bruce J. and Richard Rohrbaugh, 1998, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Fortress Press, 93.