

The Yale Divinity School Bible Study  
New Canaan, Connecticut  
Fall, 2007

The Gospel of John

II. Nicodemus

*Introduction:*

A striking encounter by night evokes images of a painting by Carrevagio, with a dramatic contrast between darkness and light. Nicodemus, a respected Pharisaic elder, comes to Jesus, perhaps out of conviction, perhaps out of curiosity. He may evoke the stance of many of the Jewish interlocutors of the evangelist. In his dialogue with Jesus he encounters a mysterious answer to his curiosity. Jesus tells him that he must be “born again/from above” (the Greek word *anōthen* means both). Misunderstanding this utterance in the crudest, material form, a puzzled Nicodemus evokes further responses from Jesus that point the way in which heavenly “rebirth” occurs, by focusing with eyes that truly see on a sight that heals, the Son of Man “lifted up” like the serpent in the desert at the time of the Exodus. Through that experience, and perhaps through a ritual action (water and the spirit), a human life can be transformed, light can break into darkness.

*Questions for Reading:*

What do you make of the setting of the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus?

Is there any significance to the description of Nicodemus as a teacher of Israel?

Where do the breaks in the chapter occur? When do we begin to hear the voice of the narrator?

What does the image of the “son of Man” likened to the serpent on the staff of Moses convey?

*Questions for Reflection:*

What is the role of misunderstanding between Jesus and Nicodemus?

What is the relationship between “water” and “spirit” in the discourse? How do these terms relate to other treatments of “water” and “spirit” in the gospel?

*For further study:*

*Basic:*

Patricia Farris, “Late Night Seminar,” *Christian Century* 119.3 (2002) 19 ATLA <  
<http://search.atlaonline.com/pls/eli/ashow?aid=ATLA0001285753>>

*More challenging:*

Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*  
(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 99-148.