
NICODEMUS AND THE SAMARITAN WOMAN: CONTRASTING MODELS OF DISCIPLESHIP

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Abstract

An investigation of the narratives within the first six chapters of the Fourth Gospel indicates that Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman function as foils within the larger typology of persons from Galilee, Samaria and Judaea who respond to Jesus. Taken together, the narratives form a diptych (3:1-21; 4:1-42). They also form the center panel of a triptych occurring between 1:19-2:25 (first panel) and 4:43-6:69 (third panel). Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman are discussed in relationship to one another and to the narratives surrounding them for their dramatic development. The dialogical character of each narrative reveals religious insights which complement one another as well as the narrative chapters which bracket them.

The narratives of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman function as the middle panel of a triptych (see next page) which indicates different models of disciples (see Ellis: 29-114). The first panel (1:19-2:25) and the third panel (4:43-6:69) parallel the narratives of the middle panel (3:1-4:42). The function of the first and third panels is drawn from the significance of the middle panel which offers several perspectives.

In John 1:19-6:69 the portrayal of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman indicates comparisons *and* contrasts with the characterizations of persons from Judaea, Samaria and Galilee who encounter Jesus. In these chapters a traditional geographical polemic is turned upside down (Bassler: 243-257). The Judaeans who present themselves as the authentic "Jews" by merely tolerating the Galileans and shunning the Samaritans become *foil* characters with minimal or no belief in Jesus. Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman represent the polemic and its resolution. Whether the narratives are historical memories is a secondary consideration since the characters symbolize a range of possibilities in responding to Jesus' call to discipleship (Collins: 32-40; Krafft: 20).

"Bethany, across the Jordan" (1:28) situates the initial narrative of the first panel. It is the locale for the Baptizer's witness to Jesus, his encounter with priests, levites and representatives of the Pharisees (1:19-34). His witness impels two of his own disciples to follow after Jesus (1:35-39). While Jesus calls his first disciples in Judaea, the home of Andrew, Simon Peter and Philip is Bethsaida near the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee (1:40-44). Nathanael, whom Philip seeks out, typifies a Judaeans' dismissal of the Galilean region when Philip identifies Nazareth as Jesus' home: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (1:45-46). Ironically, Jesus encounters Nathanael and identifies him as "a true Israelite"

while Nathanael identifies Jesus, the Nazarene, as "Son of God . . . king of Israel" (1:47-49).

"Cana in Galilee" (2:1, 11; 4:46) is the next location, where Jesus changes water into wine (2:1-11), and heals an official's son at a distance (4:46-54). The signs are substantial narrative brackets in the first and third panels which circumscribe Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. They introduce and repeat positive responses to Jesus which the middle panel emphasizes. In the wedding sign Jesus "reveal[ed] his glory and his disciples believed in him" (2:11). When Jesus returned to Galilee, "the people there welcomed him" (4:45). An official who encounters Jesus believes that his son will recover based solely on Jesus' word (4:50). After he returns home to find his son healed (4:53), his belief deepens and his entire household become believers. In chapter six Jesus multiplies loaves and fish after crossing the Sea of Galilee (6:1-15). The crowd believes in him and identifies him as the "Prophet who is to come into the world" (6:15).

What about the Judaeans? In the first panel, they provide a contrast with the wedding group in Galilee. Observing Jesus as he cleanses the temple, the Judaeans demand a sign from Jesus which they subsequently misunderstand: "Destroy this temple . . . and in three days I will raise it up" (2:13-20). An editorial note equates the believing response of many Jerusalemites with the signs Jesus worked. Nonetheless, the note warns the reader that "Jesus would not trust himself to them because he knew them all. He needed no one to give him

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TRIPTYCH

First Panel (1:19-2:25)	Middle Panel (3:1-4:42): Diptych		Third Panel (4:43-6:69)
1. Witness of John (1:19-34) Bethany in Judaea, v. 28	Nicodemus (3:1-21) v. 2	Contrasts 1. Setting	Samaritan Woman (4:1-42) vv. 5, 6
2. Calling of Disciples (1:35-50) Judaea but Bethsaida in Galilee, home of three disciples, v. 44	vv. 1, 10 vv. 2-10 vv. 13-21	2. Status 3. Dialogue 4. Monologue	vv. 7-10, 17-18 vv. 7-15 -----
3. Water changed to wine (2:1-11) Cana in Galilee, vv. 1, 11	-----	5. Dialogue 6. "Disciples" return	vv. 16-26 vv. 27, 31-38
4. Cleansing of temple (2:13-20) Jews in Jerusalem, v. 13	-----	7. Woman departs 8. Townspeople respond	vv. 28-29 vv. 30, 39-42
5. Editorial note (2:23-25) people in Jerusalem, v.23	-----		
			1. Healing of official's son (4:46-54) Cana in Galilee, v. 46; see v. 54
			2. Healing of Paralytic (5:1-9) person in Jerusalem, vv. 1, 2
			3. Aftermath of healing (5:10-18) Jews in Jerusalem, v. 18
			4. Feeding of 5000 (6:1-15) Crowd near Sea of Galilee, vv. 1,15
			5. Jesus' discourses (6:24-69) crowds: Tiberias in Galilee, v. 23; Capernaum in Galilee, v. 24

testimony about human nature. He was well aware of what was in a person's heart" (2:23-25).

In the third panel, the Judaeans' second appearance in Jerusalem is another contrast with the Galilean household who believed in Jesus after the recovery of the official's son. Jesus heals a paralytic of his thirty-eight year affliction on the sabbath (5:1-9). Immediately, the paralytic is questioned about the healer's identity (5:12-13). Although Jesus warns him: "Give up your sins so that something worse may not overtake you," the man informs the Jews that Jesus is the healer (5:15). As a result, the Jews begin to persecute him (5:16; see 5:18). Whether the "Jews" are the religious authorities, i.e., the Pharisees, the people of Israel or a combination of groups is an interpretive question for many verses in the gospel (Von Wahlde).

The Judaeans' third appearance links them with the Galileans as the "crowd" in chapter six (see Olsson: 29). Both groups respond to Jesus' discourse with murmuring, questioning and quarreling among themselves (6:24-52). The discourse also prompts many of the disciples in the crowd to leave Jesus (6:66-69).

What group emerges as genuine believers according to the narratives in the first and third panels? The Galileans are identified as disciples in their positive responses to Jesus and through the contrasts drawn between them and the Judaeans. A consistent shifting pattern of narrative scenes according to a geographical schema, i.e., Judaea, Cana, Jerusalem (1:19-2:25), Cana, Jerusalem, Galilee (4:45-6:69) provides a continuity for the panels (see triptych).

The narratives of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman form a diptych within the middle panel (3:1-4:42). Contrasts highlight the unity of the diptych (see triptych). The setting indicates different places and times: Jerusalem (implied) and Shechem (4:5), night (3:2) and noon (4:6). Religious/social positions are identified.

"A Pharisee . . . a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the office of teacher of Israel" (3:1, 10) describe prominent status while the proper name "Nicodemus" may designate a specific tradition. In contrast, the "woman" is described four times according to regional identification, "Samaritan" (4:7-10). An editorial note reminds the reader of her unacceptable status: "Recall that Jews have nothing to do with Samaritans" (4:9). Her present situation of no husbands compared to five previous ones indicates her conspicuous but lowly status (4:17-18).

Dialogues Reverse Status

The contrasts of setting and religious/social status wherein the woman is a marginal figure become surprisingly insignificant when one compares the contrasts which *reverse* religious/social status in the dialogical development of the narratives. A hint of reversals occurs in the introductions to the dialogues. The time designation of Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus is "at night" (3:2). Given the symbolic dark/light dichotomy which identifies the world/Jesus (1:10-11) and non-believers/disciples (3:19-21), Nicodemus represents a group who does not accept Jesus. Nonetheless, as a prominent teacher, Nicodemus takes the initiative with Jesus by recognizing *his* credentials (3:2). The Samaritan woman, however, recalls the hostile tradition between Jews and Samaritans. As *teacher*, she questions his demand: "You are a Jew. How can you ask me, a Samaritan and a woman, for a drink?" (4:9).

When Jesus replies to Nicodemus, he declares the necessity of being "begotten from above" in order to "see the reign of God" (3:3). Perhaps Jesus' statement does not follow Nicodemus' first remark. Nicodemus misunderstands Jesus and considers his words literally, conjuring up the image of returning to a mother's womb as an old

man. The play on the word *anōthen*, “from above” or “again” did not occur to him (3:4). Jesus develops his statement by equating “water” and “Spirit” with “begotten from above” (3:5-8). When Nicodemus asks how it will happen, Jesus responds rhetorically: “You hold the office of teacher of Israel and still do not understand these matters?” (3:9-10).

Jesus’ first dialogue with the Samaritan woman, however, is lively! His statement challenges her imagination: “If only you recognized God’s gift, and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would have asked him instead, and he would have given you living water” (4:10). Instead of flatly asking how this will happen as Nicodemus did, the woman reveals her own logic. Without a bucket visible to draw from the deep well, how will Jesus produce the “flowing water?” Again as teacher, she recalls her own history about Jacob and the well. Ironically, she dismisses Jesus’ greater claims with another question (4:11-12). Jesus replies by declaring that his gift of water will satiate a person’s thirst definitively. How? It will become “a fountain within . . . leaping up to provide eternal life” (4:14). The woman does not resist Jesus now. Not to be thirsty and no more daily trips to draw water from the well are wonderful possibilities in her life: “Give me this water, sir” she exclaims (4:15).

Returning to the second half of the Nicodemus narrative (3:11-21), *monologue* replaces dialogue. Verses 11 and 12 alternate “I” and “we” as the speaker. Here and in the following verses whether the instruction is intended to be Jesus’ or that of the community is debated. Nevertheless, the continuity of both in the message is clear. The speaker insists that the testimony is based on knowing and seeing. If Nicodemus does not accept it and does not believe statements about “earthly things,” how can he believe “those of heaven” (3:11-12)? In these introductory verses, wonder is expressed about Nicodemus’ inability to grasp testimony, thereby linking this monologue to the questions in the preceding dialogue (3:4, 9, 10).

The monologue describes *how* an individual is “begotten of the Spirit,” clarifying Jesus’ enigmatic statements (3:5-8). Jesus as God’s “only Son” was sent into the world to save it by being “lifted up” (crucified and risen). Consequently, believers “may not die but may have eternal life” (3:14-16). God did not send his Son to condemn the world. Self-condemnation occurs when an individual refuses to believe in Jesus. Practicing evil (activities) corresponds to the refusal to believe (3:17-20). By believing in Jesus, an individual avoids condemnation.

How Nicodemus responded to the monologue is not indicated. When Nicodemus appears a second time, the Pharisees are discussing the possibility of arresting Jesus. Nicodemus asks if it would be a proper procedure since their law does not condemn a person “without first hearing him and knowing the facts” (7:50-51). The

Pharisees respond by taunting him: “Do you not tell us you are a Galilean, too” (7:52). Nicodemus’ status suffers. In his final appearance, Nicodemus assists Joseph of Arimathea with Jesus’ burial. He brings “a mixture of myrrh and aloes which weighed about a hundred pounds” (19:38-42).

The portrayal of Nicodemus is consistent. First, the phrase which introduces him, “came to him” (3:2), is repeated in the other appearances (7:50; 19:39). Although the phrase may describe Nicodemus’ physical approach to Jesus, it probably suggests a transferred sense—his initial readiness to believe in him. Second, his silent response to Jesus’ monologue (3:11-21) is repeated when the Pharisees taunt him (7:52). His concern about legal precision and being expelled from the group is greater than witnessing on Jesus’ behalf. Again, Nicodemus does not speak up with Joseph of Arimathea in securing Jesus’ body from the authorities. He is silent while preparing Jesus’ body for burial. A clue to his behavior is his association with Joseph, “a disciple of Jesus (although a secret one for fear of the Jews)” (19:38).

Unlike Nicodemus who neither replies to Jesus’ statement (3:10) nor to the monologue (3:11-21), the Samaritan woman responds to Jesus, who continues the dialogue in the next section of the narrative (4:16-26). Again, Jesus begins the dialogue by commanding her to call her husband and return to him (4:16; see 7). The woman’s reply, however, is a subtle change from the first scene where she was instructing Jesus with well known tradition. Here she speaks the truth of her present situation: “I have no husband” (4:17a). By acknowledging her own past and present situation, the woman is enabled to identify Jesus in a new way. She calls him a “prophet” and refers to the tradition of different locales of worship for Samaritans and Judaeans (4:19-20).

Similar to the change of speaker in the Nicodemian monologue (3:11-21), Jesus begins as the speaker but shifts to “we” statements (4:21-22). True worship is not defined by Mount Gerizim (an ancient holy place for the Samaritans) or Jerusalem. Rather, “in spirit and truth” describes “authentic worshippers” (4:21-24). While the *monologue* addressed the question of *how* believers would have access to the Spirit, Jesus’ response to the woman describes *one ability* which the Spirit gives to believers.

The woman’s understanding of prophet is an inclusion device for Jesus’ instruction on worship. While she had identified Jesus as a prophet (4:19), now she connects the function of prophet to the coming Messiah (4:25). Jesus again acknowledges the truth of her statement: “I who speak to you am he” (4:26; see 18). Jesus’ response, “I am he” is revelatory. While “I am [he]” (*ego eimi*) may be interpreted *literally*, the meaning of the phrase in the Fourth Gospel is *christological*. It draws attention to the divine name revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai: “I AM” (Exod 3:14). The sudden intrusion of the disciples upon

the scene and their inability to ask Jesus about the situation may preclude additional dialogue. Unlike Nicodemus, however, the woman leaves Jesus to acknowledge her experience to the townspeople. She considers the possibility of Jesus as the Messiah (4:28-29). The effect of her witness prompts them to come to Jesus (4:30).

The split scene whereby the disciples are silent before Jesus while the woman witnesses to Jesus before the Samaritans (4:27-30) shifts to a dialogue between the disciples and Jesus (4:31-38). Again, the Johannine devices of misunderstanding followed by Jesus' monologue are functional, drawing attention to the *first* scene between Jesus and the woman. The interlude provides another contrast between their understanding of Jesus and the insight of a new disciple, the Samaritan woman. Finally, the scene shifts to the townspeople. They are believers in Jesus through the catalyst of the woman's proclamation. After asking Jesus to spend time with them, their belief deepens through Jesus' word. Hearing for themselves, they identify Jesus more comprehensively than the woman: "We know that this truly is the Savior of the world" (4:39-42).

The criterion of consistency is difficult to apply to the Samaritan woman since she appears only once in the gospel. She functions as a contrast figure for individuals and groups responding to Jesus in the first, middle and third panels of the triptych. Her relationship to Jesus from an initial hostility to a climactic commitment which includes witnessing to him is quite different from theirs. Although both Nicodemus and the paralytic (third panel) are involved in narratives where hostility against Jesus is mounting, fear of recrimination from the Pharisees prevents them from proclaiming Jesus' identity. Nicodemus, in spite of his privileged status, cannot imagine a closer following of Jesus, entailing discipleship in public. The healed paralytic, too, does not understand Jesus' significance beyond that of a wonder worker. Identifying him to the authorities relieved him of any further connection with Jesus.

Model of Effective Discipleship

The effectiveness of her witness aligns the Samaritan woman with John who led two disciples to follow Jesus on the strength of his word. Having spent some time with him, they brought others to Jesus (first panel). Again, she is similar to the official who believed on Jesus' word before the confirming sign (third panel). She, like the Galilean and Judaeans crowds who were fed on the hillside, identified Jesus with the title "prophet" (third panel). Unlike the Judaeans watching Jesus in the

temple, she asked for no sign (first panel). Unlike the disciples who were with Jesus at the well, she was not afraid to ask him questions. Her misunderstanding of Jesus' statements led to clarity while there is no indication of the disciples' gradual understanding of Jesus' monologue (middle panel).

While the Samaritan woman is similar to the Galileans in her responses, she symbolizes more. Her marginal status compared with the Judaeans, Galileans and even her own townspeople is transformed because of her deep commitment as a disciple to Jesus. She represents the invitation of Jesus to each person regardless of background. Nicodemus, in contrast, may be her perfect foil. His status in Jerusalem was assured; yet he lacked the imagination and daring to reconsider traditional viewpoints. His colleagues respected him; yet fear prevented him from answering their rejoinder. Breaking the barrier of silence—violating the taboo against Jewish/Samaritan relationships as well as male/female relationships outside the home—the woman took her first step toward liberation. Keeping silence, even though not required by tradition, the rabbi missteps, becoming prey to stagnation.

Neither the model of initial discipleship from Nicodemus nor mature discipleship from the Samaritan woman are praised or condemned in the text. *Why* each responded in a particular way, *what* resources prompted the reply and *how* these questions function in other narratives are important in considering the mystery of discipleship in the Johannine community. The questions continue among believers today.

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