

### Introduction.

The *Encounters with Jesus* series looks at the transforming nature of these interactions. You could not meet Jesus without being challenged, and in many cases transformed altogether. In this article I want to examine a very familiar encounter which I believe has been consistently misunderstood by Christian preachers and hearers alike.

The traditional version of events usually sounds something like this. There was an important Jewish leader who lacked the courage to come to Jesus publicly so he came at night. He did not know God and so Jesus gave him the basics of the gospel. He was so ignorant that the simple idea of being born again was beyond his understanding. This approach is based on two misconceptions. First, that the teachings of Jesus were completely new and without precedent in Judaism and second, that Pharisees were spiritually dull and did not understand the grace of God.

This explanation reveals more about Christian prejudice than the text – so let's try to look at this with new eyes.

### Who was Nicodemus?

3:1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council.

A Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, who, according to the Gospel of John, showed favour to Jesus. He appears three times in the Gospel: the first is when he visits Jesus one night to listen to his teachings (3:1-21); the second is when he states the restraints of the law concerning the arrest of Jesus during the Feast of Tabernacles (7:45-51); and the last follows the Crucifixion, when he assists Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the corpse of Jesus for burial (19:39-42).

The Jewish Encyclopedia and many Biblical historians have theorised that Nicodemus is identical to Nakhdimon ben Gurion, mentioned in the Talmud as a wealthy and popular holy man reputed to have had miraculous powers. He was an opponent of the Zealots and of the rebellion against Rome that led to destruction of Jerusalem. When Vespasian became

emperor, Nicodemus (Nakhdimon) sought peace with the emperor's son Titus, who was conducting the war. He opposed the war which the Zealots began they destroyed the stores of provisions that he and his friends had accumulated for the use of pilgrims in Jerusalem.

Nicodemus is mentioned three times in the gospel of John.

In the first of these passages he is represented as "a ruler of the Jews" who made his visit to Jesus by night, in order that he might not be known as one of the latter's disciples. During this visit he debated with Jesus about "rebirth associated with immersion", which was a well known rabbinical term associated with proselyte baptism.

In the second passage he cautions his fellow rabbis with regard to the law concerning the accusation against Jesus.

In the third passage he and Joseph of Arimathæa are described as having taken charge of the body of Jesus in order to give it decent burial. That the man brought into such prominence in the fourth Gospel must have been a well-known figure of Jewish society at the time is evident. In all probability he is identical with the Nicodemus ben Gorion mentioned in the Talmud, a popular Jewish saint noted for his miraculous powers; and this would explain also the reference to "heavenly things" in Jesus' debate with him (John 3:12).

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews. By calling Nicodemus a Pharisee, John tells us immediately his theological frame of reference. For example, if we call a man a Baptist, a Presbyterian or an Anglican we are saying something about the theological frame of reference in which he is found. The same thing is true of the term "Pharisee".

Among the teachings of the Pharisees is the statement,

"All Israel has a share in the age to come."

What that meant is that anyone who was born a Jew, by virtue of being born a Jew, would have automatic rights into God's kingdom.

While a Gentile would have to undergo a process of conversion to qualify, Jews had no need for that process. Anyone who had been born a Jew would have automatic rights into God's kingdom. In later Rabbinic development they made certain exceptions to that rule. Among these exceptions were Jewish believers in Jesus. There were others but initially all Israel had a share in the age to come.

A Rabbinic Debate of Note

3:2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

What are the clues to Nicodemus's true quest? While it's often said that Nicodemus meets Jesus at night to avoid being seen in this illicit liaison, an alternate interpretation is more instructive. The rabbis taught that the Torah was best studied at night when it was quiet and the distractions of the day had subsided. Nicodemus uses his precious study time to expand his search beyond the standard texts. In this view, Jesus himself becomes the book into which Nicodemus delves, mining every word for wisdom and understanding. Nicodemus opens the discussion with a remarkable affirmation of faith:

"Teacher [rabbi], we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these miracles except by the power of God."

3:3 Jesus says to Nicodemus, *"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."*

3:4 *"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"*

Nicodemus' response is frequently misunderstood. Nicodemus was not speaking in literal terms. We must give him credit for a little common sense. Surely he was not so feeble-minded as to think Jesus was really talking about re-entering the womb and literally being born again. A teacher himself, Nicodemus understood the rabbinical method of teaching spiritual truth in symbols, and he was merely picking up Jesus' symbolism. He was really saying, "I *can't* start all over. It's too late. I've gone too far in my religious system to start all over. There's no hope for me if I must begin from the beginning."

In many sermons I have heard on John 3, his response is interpreted to mean that he didn't understand what Jesus meant by that expression, to be "born again". But notice, that is not his question. He is not asking "how is one born again". What he is asking is; "How can one be born again, *when he is old?*"

Now if the problem was simply, what do you mean by being born again, what difference would relative age make? How is one born again whether he is a child, a teenager, a young man or an old man?

Nicodemus does know something about that term "born again". It was a well known term used in Pharisaic writings. What he doesn't understand is how someone has this experience after he has reached a certain stage in life.

Within Pharisaic Judaism, there were six different ways of being born again.

All six different ways were in the realm of the physical. Let me also add at this point that in Pharisaic writings to be born physically was given a certain expression. That expression was, "to be born of water". (3:5) To be of water meant to be born physically, and to be born physically as a Jew was all you needed to enter into the kingdom. Yet Jesus says you must be born again and Nicodemus doesn't understand how that is possible for someone that has reached a certain age in life. The reason he doesn't understand it, is because in Phariseeism, while they had that term, it was a physical term, and there were six different ways of being born again.

Two of the six Nakdimon did not qualify for.

One of these ways which he did not qualify for was to convert from being a Gentile to Judaism. A converted Gentile was said to be born again. Nicodemus was born a Jew, and he did not have to undergo a process of conversion so he did not qualify for the new birth in this way.

A second way it was possible to be born again that he did not qualify for, was to be crowned king. When a man was crowned king, he was said to be born again. John doesn't even hint that Nicodemus was a member of the house of David. But even if he was, at this point in Jewish history, the Jews were thoroughly under the domination of the Roman Empire and there would have been no opportunity for him to have been crowned king anyway. So these two ways, he couldn't qualify for anyway.

There were four other ways that he did.

The third way one could be born again was by one's Bar Mitzvah, that is the special type of Jewish confirmation that occurs when the Jewish boy is thirteen years old, as through a ceremony at that point he takes upon himself the obligations of the Law of Moses, and at that point from the viewpoint of the Jewish law he is reckoned as an adult, and can be counted among the ten men necessary for a Jewish service to be conducted. Having undergone this

process of the Jewish Bar Mitzvah ceremony, he is said to be born again. Obviously at this point, Nicodemus is well past the age of thirteen. He was born again at that age.

The fourth way one could be born again and one he qualified for was to marry.

When a Jewish man took a wife he was said by the Rabbis to be born again. Now John does not even mention that Nicodemus had a wife, but we know that he did because of verse 1 where he is referred to as a ruler of the Jews, which means he was among the 71 members of the Jewish Sanhedrin. Among the prerequisites of membership of the Jewish Sanhedrin was you had to be a married man. A single man of any age simply did not qualify. Jewish men in those days married between the ages of sixteen and twenty so some time during that period he was born again for the second time.

The fifth way it was possible to be born again within Pharisaic Judaism was to be ordained as a Rabbi.

When a man was ordained as a Rabbi, he was said to be born again. Nicodemus being a leading Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin meant that he was also ordained a Rabbi which occurred around the age of thirty in those days, and at that point he was born again for the third time.

There was only one other way that it was possible to be born again, and that was to become the head of a Rabbinic Seminary or Yeshiva or Rabbinic school where you had the authority to both train and ordain future Rabbis. We know that Nicodemus had attained even this level in Jewish society by the way Jesus addresses him in verse 10, where Jesus calls him "The Teacher of Israel". (It is unfortunate that the KJV has translated v10 to read "A teacher of Israel" ignoring that the Greek text has the word "the" in front of it.

The New Testament was translated by Gentile committees who didn't always understand the Jewish background, and when they saw "the" teacher of Israel they saw nothing significant about it. But there is a significant difference.) Those who were common Rabbis were referred to as "a teacher of Israel" but anyone who was the head of a Rabbinic Seminary or a Yeshiva was given a title of "The Teacher of Israel". The fact that Jesus calls him not "a teacher of Israel" but "*The* Teacher of Israel", points out that he was the head of one of several Rabbinic Academies in the Jerusalem area, something attainable at about the age of fifty. At that point he was born again for the fourth time.

But having reached this level, at this age he has used up all of the ways of being born again within Pharisaic Judaism. That is why he is asking the question the way he is asking it. How can a man be born again when he is old? What he is saying is; "I've used up all my options. From the framework of my Judaism there is no other way of being born again." Except that is, the way he suggests in verse 4, that is to re-enter his mother's womb again, become a foetus again, be born again physically and start the process all over again, being born again at the ages of *13, 20, 30 and 50*.

No, what Jesus is doing with Nicodemus is using a very common Jewish method of teaching called *qal wa'chomer*: deduction from "the light & the heavy", which is to go from that which is known to that which is unknown. The known is the expression "to be born again", but the unknown was its spiritual ramifications and this is what he proceeds to do next in 3:5.

3:5 "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."

3:6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.

By saying "...unless you are born of water and the spirit", Jesus is saying that the teaching that all Israel automatically has a share in the age to come, and that physical birth as a Jew is enough is wrong. A person needs two births, to be born of water and the spirit. To be born of water is physical birth, but to be born of the spirit means spiritual re-birth. Unless you are born both physically and spiritually, you cannot enter into God's kingdom.

Now the question is; "How then can you be born again spiritually?"

Now Jesus explains how one is born again spiritually. He points out that there are two steps. God does one, but man must do the other.

John 3:14; "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up. Whosoever believes may in him have eternal life." Step number one is God's step to send his Son to be the final sacrifice for sin. When Jesus died on the cross he provided salvation for all. God has done all he needs to do to provide salvation for all. But because salvation has been provided for all, that by itself will save no-one.

Because there must be that second step in which the individual must personally trust or believe in God's provision before he has eternal life.

Perhaps among the most famous verses in John's Gospel is the very next one John 3:16 where the same two steps are repeated. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son", that is step number one. That is a finished step. God has done all he needs to do to provide salvation for men. But again, that alone saves no-one. Because then comes the second step. "whosoever believes on him will not perish but have everlasting life." Now until Nicodemus himself takes the second step and owns Jesus as his Messiah he will not have eternal life, he will not enter into the kingdom. For Nicodemus, that was too much of a new truth for him to accept at this point. Later on in chapter 7 we still find him struggling with it, but at the end of John's gospel he finally comes across and owns Jesus as his Messiah.

3:7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'

3:8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

3:9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

3:10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?"

I am indebted to Dr Arnold Fruchtenbaum for many of the insights cited above.

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