

A CONTRAST BETWEEN NICODEMUS AND JOHN THE BAPTIST IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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I. INTRODUCTION

A strong connection between Nicodemus and John the Baptist is made apparent through a study of their introductions in 1:6–8, 3:1–2, and John’s repetition of Jesus’ monologue with Nicodemus (3:11–12) at 3:31–32. First, a close look at the introductions of the Baptist and Nicodemus reveals remarkable similarities. It will be shown that the structure and literary repetition invites the reader to set the two characters in contrast, particularly in their relation to Jesus. Second, after the Nicodemus narrative, the Baptist appears again (3:23–36), repeating to his disciples the same concepts that Jesus presented to Nicodemus, further establishing their contrast. If the connection can be firmly established, it will show that John the Baptist is crucial to the interpretation of the character of Nicodemus and his discourse with Jesus and subsequent appearances.

II. COMMON INTRODUCTIONS

When discussing the introduction of Nicodemus, commentators usually focus on three things: his relation to the preceding transition (2:23–25), his involvement with the religious leaders as ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων and ἀρχῶν τῶν Ἰουδαίων, and the significance of his coming at “night” (νυκτός). However, all of them fail to see the introduction’s striking similarities to the introduction of John the Baptist (1:6–8).¹

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¹This paper’s survey of commentators includes the following: C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978); George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (2d ed.; WBC 36; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999); J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928); Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001); Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII* (AB 29; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966); F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971); Gary M. Burge, *John* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); John Calvin, *John* (Crossway Classic Commentaries; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994); Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (ed. F. N. Davey; London: Faber & Faber, 1947); Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003); Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters: The Word, the Christ, the Son of God* (Biblical Theology of the NT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009); Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (BNTC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005); J. Francis Maloney, *The Gospel of John* (SacPag 4; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998); John F. McHugh, *John 1–4* (ed. Graham N. Stanton; ICC; New York: T&T Clark, 2009); Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971); Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (transl. John Vriend; Grand Rapids:

Some scholars like Johannes Beutler have noted some of the stylistic parallels that will be presented here but do not consider their implications.² If the connections can be made, it will show that the Gospel writer expected his readers to recall the ministry of John as presented thus far and juxtapose it to Nicodemus's encounter with Jesus.

The Fourth Evangelist introduces the Baptist in 1:6–8. Many scholars argue that these verses, along with verse 15, were added later due to their interruption of the prologue's rhythm and abrupt change in subject matter.³ Nevertheless,⁴ John serves a crucial role as the light's witness *par excellence*,⁵ and therefore his inclusion

Eerdmans, 1997); Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John* (3 vols.; New York: Burns & Oats, 1965); Johannes Schneider, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (THKNT; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1978); Merrill C. Tenney, *John The Gospel of Belief: An Analytic Study of the Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); Urban C. Von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950); Ben Witherington III, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

² Johannes Beutler, *Martyria: Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Zeugnisthema bei Johannes* (Frankfurter theologische Studien 10; Frankfurt: Josef Knecht, 1972) 242–43. Grammars also note the similar parenthetical nominatives (ὄνομα αὐτῶ) in 1:6 and 3:1 (Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996] 54; A. T. Robinson, *A Grammar of the Greek NT in the Light of Historical Research* [Logos Bible Software, 1919] 460). Bernard also points out the similar construction (*John* 8). Keener, *Gospel of John* 536, believes that it is significant that the name Nicodemus is mentioned at all (for John does not name his characters often). The reason for this, he believes, is to preserve his name since he may have been well known or is named for literary reasons, i.e. his subsequent appearances in the Gospel (7:50; 19:39).

³ For a concise history of opinion regarding the prologue's structure see McHugh's Excursus I (*John* 1–4 78–90).

⁴ There are many others who argue that the Baptist was originally included (Ridderbos, *Gospel of John* 41–2; Barrett, *Gospel According to John* 159). Blomberg points out, "There is actually more potentially historical information in the prologue about John the Baptist than about Jesus" (*Historical Reliability* 72). John plays such a major role for the Fourth Evangelist in the prologue that calling his appearances secondary interpolations is unconvincing.

⁵ J. Francis Maloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading John 1–4* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 34. Not only is John the first witness, he is also the first disciple of Jesus who leads his own disciples to him (Martin Hengel, "The Prologue of the Gospel of John as the Gateway to Christological Truth," in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* [ed. Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008] 277). For studies on John the Baptist in the Fourth Gospel and his role as witness see David R. Beck, *The Discipleship Paradigm: Readers & Anonymous Characters in the Fourth Gospel* (Biblical Interpretation Series 27; New York: Brill, 1997); Cornelis Bennema, "The Character of John in the Fourth Gospel," *JETS* 52 (2009) 271–84; James Montgomery Boice, *Witness and Revelation in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970); Raymond Edward Brown, "Three Quotations from John the Baptist in the Gospel of John," *CBQ* 22 (1960) 292–98; J. Daryl Charles, "Will the Court Please Call in the Prime Witness?": John 1:29–34 and the "Witness"-Motif," *TrinJ* 10 (1989) 71–83; Jean Danielou, *The Work of John the Baptist* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966); C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Cambridge University, 1976), esp. 248–301; Everett Harrison Falconer, "The Son of God among the Sons of Men, Part 17: Jesus and John the Baptist," *BibSac* 106 (1949) 228–38; Robert A. Falconer, "The Testimony of John the Baptist," *The Biblical World* 20 (1902) 441–49; A. E. Harvey, *Jesus on Trial: A Study in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1977); Andrew T. Lincoln, "Trials, Plots and the Narrative of the Fourth Gospel," *JNT* 56 (1994) 3–30; idem, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), esp. 57–72; Marcus L. Loane, *John the Baptist as Witness and Martyr* (London: Blundell House, 1969); David J. MacLeod, "The Witness of John the Baptist to the Word: John 1:6–9," *BibSac* 160 (2003) 305–20; Robert J. Matthews, *A Burning Light: The Life and Ministry of John the*

into the prologue is not so out of place.⁶ As pointed out by Beutler, John's role as witness finds no genuine parallel in the Synoptics, Acts, Apostolic Fathers, or Mandaeism.⁷ The Baptist is introduced as follows: Ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος, ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης· οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν, ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός. The Baptist is described as ἄνθρωπος, a term used frequently throughout the Fourth Gospel.⁸ He is described as being ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ.⁹ "His mission was not of human, but of divine origin," much like that of the OT prophets (Isa 6:8; Jer 1:7; Ezek 2:3).¹⁰ The prologue goes on to state his name with a periphrastic nominative, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης. It continues with the resumptive pronoun οὗτος, which refers directly back to Ἰωάννης and the aorist indicative ἦλθεν places him firmly within salvation history (v. 7). The first half of verse 7 states the special task given to John by God: εἰς μαρτυρίαν ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός. John came to testify, not *to* the light, but to others *concerning* the light.¹¹ The following ἵνα indicates the purpose of John's testimony, that πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι' αὐτοῦ. John is the instrument by which the light is made known and his testimony seeks to elicit faith in that light (cf. 20:31).¹² D. A. Carson states the significance of John's testimony: "All who have ever come to faith are indirectly dependent on his opening proclamation of the identity and saving purpose of Jesus Messiah."¹³ Leon

Baptist (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1972); James C. Plastaras, *The Witness of John: A Study of Johannine Theology* (New York: Bruce, 1972); A. T. Robertson, *John the Loyal: Studies in the Ministry of John the Baptist* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977); Adolf Schlatter, *Johannes der Täufer* (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt, 1956); Charles Hugh Scobie, *John the Baptist* (London: SCM, 1964); W. Barnes Tatum, *John the Baptist and Jesus: A Report of the Jesus Seminar* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1994); Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Allison A. Trites, *The NT Concept of Witness* (New York: Cambridge University, 1977); Robert L. Webb, *John the Baptist and Prophet: A Socio-Historical Study* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991); Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University, 1968).

⁶ Even if John's role in the prologue was added, Bultmann states the importance of its inclusion: "Its insertion here shows how important this witness is for him; indeed the more one sees how loosely this insertion is related to the main line of thought of the Prologue (and it is more than a note), the more apparent it becomes that the Evangelist includes it here for a special personal reason" (*Gospel of John* 49).

⁷ Beutler, *Martyria* 285.

⁸ Many commentators believe that the Evangelist is contrasting the Baptist, who is a man, with Jesus, who always existed (Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος). This finds further defense with the use of ἐγένετο, expressing that John "came on the scene" but Jesus preceded him (Beasley-Murray, *John* 12).

⁹ The preposition παρὰ also differentiates the Baptist from Jesus who "was not, like Jesus, sent out from the very presence of God, but one whose coming was brought about by God" (BDAG 756).

¹⁰ Morris, *John* 89. McHugh notes that ἀποστέλλω, in Classical Greek, is more emphatic than στέλλω and πέμπω, which is the "commissioning of a representative to discharge a particular task," and in the case of John 1:6, that commission is by the authority of God (*John* 1–4 22–23).

¹¹ Ibid. 25. John Calvin reiterates that Christ did not need a witness (5:34), "this witness was appointed not for Christ's sake but for ours" (*John* 19).

¹² Beutler references MacGregor who argues that a distinction can be made that the "Ziel des Zeugnisses bei Johannes sei nicht der Glaube an Gott durch Christus, sondern der Glaube an Christus durch Johannes" (*Martyria* 245).

¹³ Carson, *John* 121. Bultmann states, "The fact that all men are to be brought to faith by the Baptist, shows that the Evangelist was not thinking of the historical situation of the Baptist's preaching, but that he was referring to his witness as it was constantly re-presented through the tradition and which in this way retains its actuality" (*John* 51). Robert Fortna believes that this universalistic idea derives from the

Morris adds, “John came to bring men to decide, to make a definitive act of faith.”¹⁴ If all who believe are dependent on John’s witness, then likewise all who fail to believe in Jesus reject John’s testimony. Therefore the question is how Nicodemus responds to John’s witness.

Nicodemus comes onto the scene after Jesus’ prophetic act in the Temple (2:13–22). The narrative transitions with 2:23–25, stating that many people believed in Jesus after seeing the signs he was doing (τὰ σημεῖα ἃ ἐποίει).¹⁵ However, though they believed (ἐπίστευσαν), Jesus did not entrust (οὐκ ἐπίστευεν) himself to them because he knew what was in man (τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ). Scholars point out that the application of ἄνθρωπος to Nicodemus (3:1) connects him firmly to this transition, for he also tells Jesus that, “no one can do these signs that you do” (οὐδεὶς γὰρ δύναται ταῦτα τὰ σημεῖα ποιεῖν ἢ σὺ ποιεῖς). Thus, the Nicodemus narrative sheds more light on why Jesus did not entrust himself to those who believed in the signs.¹⁶

Nicodemus is introduced as follows: Ἦν δὲ ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων, Νικόδημος ὄνομα αὐτῷ, ἄρχων τῶν Ἰουδαίων· οὗτος ἦλθεν πρὸς αὐτὸν νυκτὸς. Not only is ἄνθρωπος used in 2:25 as stated above, it refers back to John the Baptist in 1:6. These are the only two passages where ἄνθρωπος is mentioned with a name proceeding. Nicodemus is described as ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων¹⁷ whereas John is παρὰ θεοῦ.¹⁸ John was sent from God to bear witness to Jesus that he is the Son of God (1:34). Nicodemus was from the party of the Pharisees and their doctrine, a follower of the old religion. Just as with John, a periphrastic nominative is used to identify Nicodemus. The construction ὄνομα αὐτῷ occurs nowhere else in the NT except twice in Revelation (6:8; 9:11), increasing the likelihood of a connection. Nicodemus is given additional detail as being a ἄρχων τῶν Ἰουδαίων. This title only appears here, but clearly refers to Nicodemus’s seat on the Sanhedrin. Like the Baptist, Nicodemus enters the scene with the resumptive pronoun οὗτος and the aorist indicative ἦλθεν. However, whereas John came to be a public witness (εἰς

traditions like Mark 1:5 that the whole of Judea and the inhabitants of Jerusalem went out to see the Baptist (*The Gospel of Signs* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970] 165).

¹⁴ Morris, *John* 91.

¹⁵ Andreas Köstenberger defines “signs” as “not primarily an amazing feat of power but an event in Jesus’ public ministry that has symbolic significance in attesting to Jesus as God’s authentic representative” (*Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters* 333). Robert Kysar similarly defines a “sign” as “an act of Jesus that provides the witness an opportunity for insight into Jesus’ true identity” (*John: The Maverick Gospel* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1976] 80). With this definition, Köstenberger includes the Temple clearing as a “sign.” This would seem to make sense of the “signs” mentioned in 2:23 for no signs were done in Jerusalem unless the Temple clearing qualifies as a sign or the Fourth Evangelist simply does not feel the need to make them known. Andrew Lincoln states that even if the Temple clearing should be considered a sign, it does not explain the plural form in 2:23. He argues that the plural “signs” refers to the signs in Jesus’ ministry as a whole (*The Gospel According to Saint John* 145). In any case, he is right to point out that the reason behind the inadequacy of their faith is its failure “to grasp the significance of Jesus’ person and commit itself to the implications of that significance.”

¹⁶ In this sense, the opening δέ of 3:1 should be taken as copulative rather than adversative (Robertson, *Grammar of the Greek NT in the Light of Historical Research* [Nashville: Broadman, 1934] 1184–85).

¹⁷ This use of the preposition ἐκ is partitive (*ibid.* 599).

¹⁸ Keener notes that ἄνθρωπος in the genitive occurs nowhere else in the Gospel linked with Pharisees (*John* 535).

μαρτυρίαν), Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night (πρὸς αὐτὸν νυκτός).¹⁹ C. K. Barrett observes that the Evangelist is stacking titles onto Nicodemus to portray him as a representative Jew.²⁰ Then, as Paul Duke points out, it is ironic that despite his credentials Nicodemus is in the dark, easily impressed by the signs of Jesus but failing to see their significance.²¹ Unlike John the Baptist, who sees and testifies to the light, Nicodemus appears overqualified yet remains in the dark, rejecting the testimony of Jesus and John. Placed side by side, the common introductions can be seen below (Table 1). It can be clearly seen that the introductions to these two characters bear remarkable resemblances, which shows that Nicodemus's character and discourse with Jesus cannot be completely understood apart from John's ministry. This resemblance can be defended further if one takes a look at John's appearance after the Nicodemus narrative.

III. STRUCTURE OF VERSES 11–12 AND 31–32

The link between the Nicodemus narrative and the speech of John that follows is found in 3:11–12 and 3:31–32. Many scholars argue that Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus breaks off after verse 10 or verse 15,²² being picked up with the

¹⁹ There are several interpretations for the meaning of "night" here. (1) Some argue that rabbis studied the Torah at night, so Nicodemus comes at night to learn without being disturbed (Ridderbos, *John* 123–24; Bultmann, *John* 133). "Nicodemus seeks not the cover of darkness but the blessings of the night" (McHugh, *John* 1–4 220). However, the Evangelist goes out of his way in 19:39 to state again verbatim that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. It seems doubtful that the Evangelist is just repeating the fact that Nicodemus was a zealous student. (2) Some see Nicodemus as a "seeker" who initially is in the dark but eventually comes to the light (Witherington, *John's Wisdom* 93). (3) Others see Nicodemus as one of the secret believers in 12:42 like Joseph of Arimathea who is associated with Nicodemus at the burial of Jesus (19:38). The title ἀρχων used for Nicodemus is only used three other times in reference to Jews and each case seems to imply secret belief (J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* [New York: Harper & Row, 1968] 74–77). (4) Still others believe νυκτός is symbolic for spiritual and moral darkness (1:5; 9:10; 11:10; 13:30; Carson, *John* 186; Burge, *John* 111). Craig Koester states this stance well: "Nicodemus, who had come 'by night,' represents a benighted world, squinting with incomprehension at the light of God that has appeared in Jesus" (R. Craig Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003] 12). Koester also believes that Nicodemus does not just represent "the Jews" but the world: "by the end of the discourse their nocturnal meeting becomes a microcosm of the encounter between Jesus and the world" (p. 47). (5) A few argue that "night" is just a chronological time marker of no significance. "John could have marked *nyktos* in our passage by fronting it, and his failure to do so would tend to support the view that *nyktos* here is no more than a chronological discourse marker" (F. P. Cotterell, "The Nicodemus Conversation: A Fresh Appraisal," *ExpTim* 96 [1984–85] 239). Reflecting the meaning of "night," Christine Renouard simply notes the ambiguity therein: "D'emblée donc, Nicodème est construit comme un personnage ambigu dont la trajectoire encore ouverte peut à tout moment basculer" ("Le Personnage de Nicodème comme Figure de Nouvelle Naissance" in *Études Théologiques et Religieuses* 79 [2004] 565). This ambiguity stems from the fact that coming to Jesus is closely linked to believing in him (cf. 6:35); however, Nicodemus apparently rejects Jesus' testimony.

²⁰ Barrett, *John* 204.

²¹ Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) 108. Duke comments, "The author, however, seems to find it amusing that the eminently respected sage of Israel is presently so lost in the dark."

²² Carson, *John* 203–4.

Evangelist's words, and likewise John's speech to his disciples at verse 30.²³ Others believe that verses 31–36 should be in a different spot altogether.²⁴ However, McHugh points out that σοι in verse 11, εἶπον and εἶπω in verse 12, are all singular and indicate that Jesus is still speaking to Nicodemus after verse 10.²⁵ Moreover, Keener allows for the whole speech (vv. 10–21) to be attributed to the words of Jesus, which the Evangelist applies afresh.²⁶

Table 1

John	Nicodemus
1:6 Ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος	3:1 Ἦν δὲ ἄνθρωπος
1:6 ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ	3:1 ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων
1:6 ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης	3:1 Νικόδημος ὄνομα αὐτῷ
1:7 οὗτος ἦλθεν	3:2 οὗτος ἦλθεν
1:7 εἰς μαρτυρίαν ... περὶ τοῦ φωτός	3:2 πρὸς αὐτὸν νυκτὸς

Scholars also cannot definitively conclude that John the Baptist stops his speech at verse 30 and the Evangelist picks up at verse 31. C. H. Dodd states the point: “What we constantly observe is that dramatic dialogue, often marked by vivid characterization of the interlocutors, melts imperceptibly into monologue ... without any change so marked that we can say with confidence, ‘Here Jesus, or the Baptist, is speaking, and here the evangelist.’”²⁷ Thus, verses 11–12 should be attributed to Jesus and verses 31–32 to John the Baptist, redacted by the Evangelist to emphasize the ideas presented.²⁸

After Nicodemus sets forth his final question, “How can these things be?” (v. 9), Jesus points out the irony of his credentials, “Are you a teacher of Israel and you do not understand these things?” (v. 10). This begins Jesus’ monologue, and no longer is he speaking for himself but another party is included as indicated by the switch to plural in verse 11.²⁹ The first part of Jesus’ monologue in verses 11–12

²³ John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) 374–77.

²⁴ Schnackenburg places these verses between v. 12 and v. 13 (*John* 380). Bultmann places them after v. 21 (*John* 131).

²⁵ McHugh, *John 1–4* 231.

²⁶ Keener, *John* 559.

²⁷ C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968) 308. The high Christology of vv. 31–35 should in no way lead one to conclude that the Baptist is no longer speaking since he has already made claims that Jesus is the Son of God (1:34), twice that he is the Lamb of God (1:29, 36), and the one who takes away the sins of the world (1:29). See also Ridderbos (*John* 148).

²⁸ Brown seems right, in concurrence with Dodd, that “the editor wanted to use 31–36 to recapitulate the whole of iii 1–30 and to summarize both the Nicodemus and the John the Baptist scenes” (*John I–XII* 160). However, Brown believes that vv. 31–36 were originally part of the Jesus discourse with Nicodemus.

²⁹ Scholars have proposed several different meanings for this shift from singular to plural. Some argue that the “we” stated by Jesus refers to the believing community. Others take this view and emphasize the witness of the Beloved Disciple (21:24; Lincoln, *John* 152). Ridderbos argues that it specifically refers to Jesus’ disciples (*John* 134; cf. Morris, *John* 221; Schnackenburg, *John* 376). Westcott argues it refers to the group that was with Jesus as opposed to the group with Nicodemus (*John* 52). Barrett also

can be split up into four statements (v. 11a, 11b and v. 12a, 12b), verses 11b and 12b being linked to the preceding statements with καί. Jesus states in verse 11a, ὁ οἶδαμεν λαλοῦμεν, καὶ ὁ ἑώρακαμεν μαρτυροῦμεν, but Nicodemus and those he represents reject the testimony (καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἡμῶν οὐ λαμβάνετε, 11b). Jesus goes on to argue by a *minori ad maius* argument,³⁰ if Nicodemus was told earthly things and does not believe (εἰ τὰ ἐπίγεια εἶπον ὑμῖν καὶ οὐ πιστεύετε, 12a), he certainly cannot comprehend the heavenly (πῶς ἐὰν εἶπω ὑμῖν τὰ ἐπουράνια πιστεύσετε, 12b).

When the camera turns back to John the Baptist, he reiterates what Jesus said to Nicodemus to his own disciples regarding their concerns about Jesus (3:22–36). Interestingly, John repeats what was said in verses 11–12 to Nicodemus in reverse order with the same structure, forming a chiasmus. Both sections put together can be seen below (Table 2). The chiasm reveals that the focus of the chapter is on the person of Jesus, specifically his origin. The Baptist proclaims that Jesus comes from ἄνωθεν, the word used to describe the new birth demanded of Nicodemus (v. 3). Being born from above is only possible through the one who descends to give that new birth through the Spirit. The Father gave the Spirit to Jesus without measure, so Jesus in turn, can impart life to all who come to the light (vv. 34–36).³¹

In the chiasm, the ideas of receiving (λαμβάνω) and testifying (μαρτυρία) appear frequently in the Fourth Gospel³² and are crucial terms to the relationship between the Baptist, Jesus, and Nicodemus. The term μαρτυρία is a legal term referring to a witness who actively shows up to testify that something is the case.³³ The strong link between these two terms in the Gospel shows that “Glaube ist also wesentlich durch Zeugnis vermittelt.”³⁴ Scholars like A. E. Harvey, A. T. Lincoln, and Allison A. Trites argue persuasively that the Evangelist is setting up a lawsuit between Jesus and the world (especially his own people), which is based on a re-working of the lawsuits in Isaiah 40–55.³⁵ The Gospel writer is building a “case for

takes this view and in light of 2:23–25 sees Nicodemus representing half-believing Jews impressed with Jesus’ signs (*John* 211). Von Wahlde takes a historical approach, believing that “we” refers to John’s community whereas the “you” are those who failed to believe properly (cf. 1 John 1:1–3; *Gospel and Letters* 43; Witherington, *John’s Wisdom* 98). Church fathers such as Chrysostom, Cyril, and Aquinas argued that Jesus is referring to himself, the Father, and the Spirit (McHugh, *John 1–4* 231). Bultmann believes that the Evangelist wants to retain an air of mystery in the discourse, not wishing to state clearly that Jesus is the Revealer. He also believes that the “you” attached to Nicodemus represents the whole world (*John* 146). Calvin sees it referring to all the prophets (*John* 72). Carson rejects the disciples as part of the “we” since it was too early in the ministry for them to testify. He argues, “Jesus is sardonically aping the plural that Nicodemus affected when he first approached Jesus” (*John* 198–99; Brown, *John* 132).

³⁰ Köstenberger, *John* 126.

³¹ Bruner also adopts this understanding (*John* 228).

³² These two terms occur especially in chaps. 1–5; thus, these chapters serve to show the early responses to the witness of John and Jesus. John’s witness is emphasized at the beginning (1:6–8, 15), middle (3:27–36), and end (5:33–35) of this span of chapters.

³³ L. Coenen, “Witness, Testimony,” *NIDNTT* 3.1038.

³⁴ Beutler, *Martyria* 245.

³⁵ Harvey, *Jesus on Trial*; Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*; Trites, *The NT Concept of Witness*. Elizabeth Harris is not convinced that the Gospel writer had this meaning at the fore. She defines “witness” as “any activity by and through which the heavenly character and origin of Jesus, his actions and his words, are commu-

who Jesus is” and is selecting witnesses, the first being John the Baptist.³⁶ The case that John builds, as seen in the center of the chiasm, is that the heavenly things Jesus speaks of (v. 12) refer to the person of Jesus himself and the work he has been tasked with (3:12–21). Based on the focus given to John’s testimony,³⁷ the lack of the term μαρτυρία being applied to anyone else other than him and Jesus, and the structure of this chiasm, the shift to the plural back in 3:11 likely refers to Jesus and the Baptist.³⁸ Nicodemus, along with those he represents, having rejected their witness, now stands trial with John and Jesus testifying against him.³⁹ Van den Bussche confirms this saying, “Témoign du Messie auprès d’Israël, il se fait, à la veille de sa mort (III, 24), témoin à charge contre les Juifs.”⁴⁰

Table 2

- (v. 11) ὁ οἶδαμεν ... μαρτυροῦμεν, καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἡμῶν οὐ λαμβάνετε
 (v. 12) εἰ τὰ ἐπίγεια εἶπον ὑμῖν καὶ οὐ πιστεύετε
 (v. 12) πῶς ἐὰν εἶπω ὑμῖν τὰ ἐπουράνια πιστεύσετε;
 (v. 31) Ὁ ἄνωθεν ἐρχόμενος ἐπάνω πάντων ἐστίν·
 (v. 31) ὁ ὧν ἐκ τῆς γῆς, ἐκ τῆς γῆς ἐστὶν καὶ ἐκ τῆς γῆς λαλεῖ
 (v. 32) ὁ ἑώρακεν ... μαρτυρεῖ, καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν αὐτοῦ οὐδεὶς λαμβάνει

IV. THE CONTRAST

This study has shown that the writer of the Fourth Gospel expected the reader to see a contrast between Nicodemus and John. Though some of that contrast has been highlighted already, this section will continue to develop it. In the context of the prologue, the term ἄνθρωπος is used to distinguish John from the eternity of Jesus (1:1). In the context of 2:23–25, the term is used to describe Nicodemus’ failure to interpret the signs. In the first case, John realizes his finitude in relation to Jesus and even proclaims it (1:15; 3:31); he recognizes, as every man should, his need to be born from above. On the other hand, Nicodemus is an ἄνθρωπος that

nicated,” much like the way that “sign” is used in the Fourth Gospel (*Prologue and Gospel: The Theology of the Fourth Evangelist* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994] 48).

³⁶ Charles, “Will the Court Please Call in the Prime Witness?” 72. Andrew Lincoln states, “The various characters in the narrative, most notably the leaders of the Jewish people, have to decide whether they will believe Jesus’ witness or the witness about him” (Lincoln, “Trials, Plots and the Narrative of the Fourth Gospel” 6).

³⁷ The terms “testify” and “testimony,” within the first few chapters, are used in reference to John more than anyone else (1:7x2, 8, 15, 19, 29, 32, 34; 3:26, 28). The terms are also applied to Jesus repeatedly in chap. 3 (vv. 11x2, 32x2, 33).

³⁸ This does not deny the possibility that the writer used the witness of John and Jesus as representative of the narrator and his community.

³⁹ Johannes Schneider presents an accurate description of those whom Nicodemus represents: “Es muß also in Jerusalem einen Kreis von führenden Männern gegeben haben, die zum mindesten einen starken Eindruck von Jesus bekommen hatten und ihn nicht von vornherein ablehnten. Aber in der Feststellung, daß Gott mit ihm ist, liegt noch kein Christusbekenntnis; denn das wurde auch von anderen großen Gestalten des Alten Bundes wie Mose (Exod. 3, 12) und Jeremia (Jer. 1, 19) behauptet” (*Das Evangelium nach Johannes* 91).

⁴⁰ H. van den Bussche, “La Structure de Jean I–XII,” in *L’Évangile De Jean: Études et Problèmes* (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1958) 85.

fails to recognize these things. Three times Nicodemus asks Jesus a question, and each time he uses the verb δύναται (“How can?”).⁴¹ Nicodemus is fixated on what is possible for man. As a Jew, he believed maintaining the covenant through the Law to inherit life was a command given to and capable of man (Deut 30:11–15; cf. John 5:39). However, as John testifies in verse 31 and Jesus states in 3:13, eternal life can be found only in the one who descended from heaven.⁴²

John was ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ as an emissary to bear witness to the light. John 1:19 states that an emissary of priests and Levites were ἀπέσειλαν by “the Jews,” likely the Sanhedrin, to inquire of his identity.⁴³ Since Nicodemus was on the Sanhedrin, it is likely that he would have been involved with the sending of this deputation. The connection is stronger when Nicodemus is said to be ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων, the same phrase used to single out part of the deputation in 1:24.⁴⁴ The Baptist’s response to these Pharisees is indicative of Nicodemus’s knowledge when he encounters Jesus: Ἐγὼ βαπτίζω ἐν ὕδατι· μέσος ὕμων ἔστηκεν ὃν ὑμεῖς οὐκ οἴδατε (1:26). Similarly, in 3:11 Jesus tells Nicodemus that he and John speak of what they know (οἶδαμεν), but Nicodemus does not understand (γινώσκεις; v. 10).

The construction οὗτος ἦλθον is used to contrast their relation to Jesus. John came as a testimony speaking openly that Jesus is the Son of God (1:34). Nicodemus also has a confession when he comes to Jesus but it is inadequate. He speaks it under the cover of darkness (νυκτός), and thus, instead of being a mere incomplete confession, it seems insulting, for it is not public. Nicodemus was also much older and full of credentials, so it was offputting to be taught by a young Jesus who had no recognized learning (7:15).⁴⁵ It should also be mentioned that Jesus calls Nicodemus a διδάσκαλος, a Rabbi of Israel (v. 10). When John’s disciples come to question him they also call the Baptist Ῥαββί (v. 26).⁴⁶ Thus, Nicodemus ironically is full

⁴¹ Brunner also sees this repetition (*John* 174).

⁴² It would be a profitable study to look at any textual allusion between John 3:13 and Deut. 30:11–14.

⁴³ Morris, *John* 131; Carson, *John* 142; Schnackenburg, *John* 286; Bernard, *John* 34.

⁴⁴ Schnackenburg, *John* 292.

⁴⁵ Morris, *John* 212. Bruner captures Nicodemus’s attitude well: “Nicodemus seems to be saying, ‘What’s wrong with the distance I’ve come? Why are you suggesting a whole new beginning? I don’t like your implication. Yes, candidates or beginners need a new start (if that’s what you mean by being ‘born’). But do the advanced? Give me a little credit’” (*John* 174). McHugh is correct to say, “Nicodemus thinks of entry into God’s kingdom as a gift that comes only by physical descent from Abraham” (*John* 1–4 230–31). John told the Pharisees, “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham” (Matt 3:7–9). This theme comes up again in John 8:30ff.; “the Jews” tell Jesus confidently, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone” (v. 33). Nicodemus and “the Jews” he represents focus on their ethnic descent—believing they are already a part of God’s kingdom because of their descent and covenantal status. As with the Pharisees in chap. 9, these Jews claim to “see” already—they say, “How can these things be?”—but in fact, they remain in bondage to sin (9:41).

⁴⁶ McHugh notes that this is the only place in the NT where the term *Rabbi* is applied to someone other than Jesus. “The writer thus represents the Baptist not as a solitary preacher living rough in the desert (as always in the Synoptics), but as the respected teacher of a well-defined religious group” (*John* 1–4 248). Barrett believes that the title should not be applied to John (*John* 221).

of credentials, but in fact, it is John who is a true teacher of God via the testimony of Jesus.⁴⁷

Finally, the chiasm discussed sets Nicodemus and John as polar opposites. Nicodemus sits at the top of the chiasm as the teacher of Israel who does not know or accept the testimony (v. 11). He fails even to understand the earthly realities such as John's baptism referred to in verse 5, which points to Jesus.⁴⁸ The center of the chiasm (v. 12) focuses on his certain failure to comprehend heavenly realities. When John repeats these concepts in reverse order he begins by testifying to the heavenly realities—Jesus is above all because he comes from above (v. 31). He reiterates the condition of Nicodemus as one from the earth who can only speak of earthly things (even those he cannot understand). The chiasm concludes with John's statement that no one receives the testimony of Jesus (v. 32), which clearly refers back to Nicodemus and those he represents.⁴⁹ As van den Bussche rightly concludes, "La confrontation du monde juif avec le Messie se termine sur une phrase, qui ne laisse aucun doute au sujet du dialogue avec Nicodème," i.e. "the wrath of God remains on him" (v. 36).⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Dorothy A. Lee, *The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel: The Interplay of Form and Meaning* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1994) 58.

⁴⁸ John's role in the Synoptics was to call *everyone* to repentance—to turn to God and confess their sins (Mark 1:4–5; Matt 3:2; Luke 3:3). No one was exempt from this call, not even religious leaders like Nicodemus who were zealous for the law and prided themselves on their covenant descent. John's preaching of the end times drew excitement from the crowds and religious leaders. Despite their early excitement towards John (cf. 5:35), in the end they rejected his testimony because they would later reject Jesus. They rejected him because they relied on their descent and believed eternal life was to be found within their Scriptures (5:39). If they accepted John's testimony, they would have accepted Jesus, and if they had accepted Jesus, they would have admitted that even someone like Nicodemus, Israel's teacher *par excellence*, was in bondage to sin and needed to be born from above—a birth only possible through Jesus (cf. 1:13). For more on the connection between "water and Spirit" in v. 5 and the baptism of John, see George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the NT* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1962) 226–32. This statement of Beasley-Murray captures his argument well: "If Nicodemus would be born anew, he must be baptized on repentance and faith in the word of the Kingdom preached by its herald, John the Baptist, and its representative, the Son of Man" (230). See also Everett Ferguson (*Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009] 143–44). Ferguson suggests that the water spoken of in 3:23 alludes to 3:5. See also M. Michel ("Nicodème ou le non-lieu de la Verité," *RSR* 55 [1981] 227–36). Michel sees Nicodemus as either belonging to a fringe of Judaism that is favorable to Jesus or as part of a Judeo-Christian party, who comes to the light by baptism of the Spirit. He says, "Le baptême fait naître à la lumière et, ainsi, ajuste le regard de la foi à la pleine signification de Jésus" (p. 234).

⁴⁹ Bruce, *John* 96. Ridderbos is correct to say that the general judgment refers to those who are of the earth in v. 31, which immediately harks back to Nicodemus and those he represents who could not even understand the things of the earth (v. 11; *John* 150).

⁵⁰ H. van den Bussche, "La Structure de Jean I–XII" 85. Brunner points out that the disobedience pictured here is deliberate (*John* 230). This seems to further the idea that Nicodemus was not oblivious to what Jesus said but willingly rejected his testimony. Brunner also points out that the Nicodemus narrative begins on a note of disbelief and the chapter ends with a warning of disobeying hearers (*John* 231). Bultmann likewise states, "The conclusion is less a promise than a warning. . . . The unbeliever always was under God's judgment. Through his unbelief, his decision against God's revelation, he makes this situation irrevocable. Thus the full weight of the eschatological event is found in Jesus' coming." (*John* 165–67). The connection is strengthened since eternal life can be interchanged with the kingdom of God in the Fourth Gospel. The kingdom of which Jesus speaks to Nicodemus is referred to as eter-

V. CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown that the structure of the introductions of John and Nicodemus is parallel and the chiasm in verses 11–12 and 31–32 further demonstrates the contrast being set up by the Gospel writer. Placed on trial, Nicodemus fails to receive the testimony regarding Christ, and thus his allegiance is shown and his condemnation assured (3:18)—he walks away in the manner he came, in darkness (v. 1). Dorothy Lee states, “What is impossible for Nicodemus in his story is achieved through the testimony of the Baptist in both word (vv. 28–30) and action (v. 23).⁵¹ Nicodemus clung to his traditions and descent while John knew he must be born from above: “Indeed not only does the Baptist make the transition to the new community, he himself (humanly speaking) effects that transition.”⁵² John is witness and disciple *par excellence* and Nicodemus is Pharisee and teacher of Israel *par excellence*, yet they lie on polar opposites in relation to Jesus.

Hopefully, these connections between Nicodemus and John the Baptist will help scholars better understand this Pharisee’s character and how his subsequent appearances should be interpreted. Though it sheds further light on chapter 3, the final question that still needs to be answered after his last showing in 19:40 is: “Ist Nikodemus wirklich Christ gewesen, und hat er bis zuletzt treu zur Gemeinde gestanden?”⁵³

Further investigation reveals more disparity between Nicodemus and John the Baptist, which extends well beyond the scope of this study but may be briefly noted. Their contrast carries over into a major theme presented in the Fourth Gospel, centralized on the concept of witness and confession.⁵⁴ That theme is the struggle for secretly believing Jewish rulers to publicly confess Christ. They do not confess for fear of the Jews (9:22; 12:42), unlike the Baptist who begins his testimony with an open confession (1:19–20). John’s confession seeks to put to shame those who fail to emulate the example he sets forth early in the Gospel.⁵⁵ These secret believers are represented by Nicodemus, whose secrecy is indicated by his nightly coming (3:2). The term ἄρχων used to describe Nicodemus is used sparingly in the Fourth Gospel. It is only used four times in reference to Jewish leaders and, as shown by J. Louis Martyn, is a term employed by the writer to mark off these secret believers

nal life by John (Brown, *John I–XII* 159). Brown also notes that this idea of God’s wrath is used by the Baptist in the Synoptics (Matt 3:7; Luke 3:7; cf. Lincoln, *John* 163; McHugh, *John 1–4* 256). Thus, the structure implies a negative portrayal of Nicodemus at his first appearance in the Fourth Gospel.

⁵¹ Lee, *Symbolic Narratives* 58.

⁵² *Ibid.* 59.

⁵³ Siegfried Mendner, “Nikodemus,” *JBL* 77 (1958) 295.

⁵⁴ Like “witness,” “confession” also has juridical tones and means to concede or agree that something is true and factual. One commits himself to what is confessed, to profess allegiance to it, and often does this publicly.

⁵⁵ “At critical moments in his ministry John did not remain silent but testified regarding Jesus—before the potentially hostile religious authorities (1:19–28), before the nation (1:29–34), and before his disciples, who, at least once, were upset (1:35–37; 3:26–30)” (Bennema, “Character of John in the Fourth Gospel” 283).

(12:42).⁵⁶ Their failure to openly confess Jesus as the Christ is the same as denying him, his origin, and his mission. Therefore, the Evangelist sets John forth as testifier and confessor *par excellence* in order to persuade⁵⁷ those like Nicodemus to imitate his public confession.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Martyn, *History and Theology* 74–77.

⁵⁷ Many scholars would agree that the Evangelist is at least encouraging Christians to remain faithful despite this persecution. Thus, Jean-Marie Auwers, “Sans doute y a-t-il une intention apologétique derrière le thème de la clandestinité par crainte des juifs ... l'évangéliste ne cherche pas à encourager les judéo-chrétiens timorés qui vivaient dans la crainte d'une telle sanction” (“La Nuit de Nicodème (Jean 3:2, 19:39) ou L'Ombre du Langage,” *RB* 97 [1990] 502). It would seem, however, that the Evangelist is not just being apologetic but missional to Jewish leaders like Nicodemus. Auwers makes an interesting literary connection in chap. 19 to argue for Nicodemus' eventual maturity in faith. It seems that an antithesis is set up between the malicious Jews (19:20–21, 31) and the soldiers (v. 23–24, 32–37) on the one hand, with Mary, the beloved disciple (v. 26–27), Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea on the other (v. 38–42). What takes place between 19:18 and 19:27, ending with Mary and the beloved disciple before Jesus, seems symmetric with what takes place right after his death in vv. 30–42, ending with Nicodemus and Joseph receiving his body for burial. The idea is that both scenes end with faithful disciples of Jesus.

⁵⁸ The Evangelist also sets forth the Samaritan woman in contrast to Nicodemus, who has a similar introduction to him and the Baptist. Though the connection is not as extensive, it is enough to show that she is connected to the preceding narrative. In 4:7, it is stated that ἔρχεται γυνή, which parallels 1:6 and 3:1. She is said to be ἐκ τῆς Σαμαρείας, the same construction used for Nicodemus in 3:1. She came in order to ἀντλήσαι ὕδωρ and receives the spiritual water from Jesus that Nicodemus failed to receive. Unlike Nicodemus, who fails to confess Jesus openly, the Samaritan woman testifies to her people, resulting in village-wide belief (4:39). Thus, just as the Evangelist sets John forth as a reliable testimony in order to persuade the Jews, he also uses the Samaritan woman, who was already partaking of the blessings meant for the Jews, to provoke those like Nicodemus to acknowledge Jesus as the Christ (cf. Rom. 11:11).