A Pedagogical Dialogue Leading to a Monologue (3:1–21)

Our use of a polyvalent approach will enable us further to explore the nature and function of dialogue at 3:1–21. The challenge and riposte dialogue at 2:13–22 is followed by one of the most significant dialogues that leads to a monologue (cf. Reinhartz, 1994: 571). The narrator’s ability to use 2:23–25 both as a conclusion and as an introduction to the temple narrative (2:13–22) and to the succeeding Nicodemus narrative (3:1–21) is commendable (cf. Stibbe, 1993: 52–3; Brodie, 1993: 195).1

Setting of the Dialogue

Nicodemus appears three times in the Gospel of John: one lengthy appearance at 3:1–21 and two cameo appearances at 7:50–52 and 19:39.2 The following description enables the reader to determine the setting of Nicodemus’ lengthy appearance in 3:1–21: first, the previous episode (2:13–22), where we read about Jesus’ travel from Capernaum to Jerusalem (2:12–13);3 second, the references to Jesus’ being in the temple at Jerusalem from 2:14 and onward;4 third, the introduction to the time of Passover in 2:23 (cf. 2:13);5 and fourth, the expression ἦν δὲ in 3:1 where a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of

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1 Refer to Stibbe, 1993: 51.
2 Smith (1999: 93) says that, “The appearance of Nicodemus obviously introduces a new episode, which runs through verse 21.”
5 Keener (2003: 531) says that, “This brief pericope (i.e., vv. 23–25) is transitional, connecting those who respond to Jesus’ signs in 2:1–22 with the incomplete faith of Nicodemus in 3:1–10. In 2:11 the disciples responded to Jesus’ sign with faith, but 2:23–24 makes clear that sign-faith, unless it progresses to discipleship, is inadequate.” See Carson, 1991: 184; Moloney, 1998: 88–103.
the Jews, is said to come to Jesus at night.\(^6\) This sequence of events is very important for understanding the setting of the narrative in 3:1–21.\(^7\) Neyrey (2007: 76) suggests that, “we remember that in 2:24–25 Jesus did not trust himself to the people in Jerusalem who allegedly believed in him because of signs, for he knew what was in everyone. This extends also to 3:1–21, when another Jerusalemite comes to him because of signs.” From what Neyrey says here we understand that the conjunctive particle Ἦν δὲ (3:1) is used to mark the narrative progression from the previous episodes to the latter. As Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night and engages in a conversation, the section in 3:1–21 appears as a ‘Night Time Dialogue’ (cf. Smith, 1999: 93–4; Kermode, 1987: 450).\(^8\) The coming of Nicodemus to Jesus at night in an unspecified location and time marks the temporal nature of the setting (cf. Resseguie, 2005: 87, 108–10; Powell, 1990: 72–4).\(^9\) From other details the reader is informed that the larger setting of the Nicodemus story (in 3:1–21) is religious (cf. Resseguie, 2005: 87, 113–4; Beasley-Murray, 1987: 47).\(^10\) While the Passover festival season suggests a religious setting, the coming of Nicodemus during the night time sets a temporal setting for the story.

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6 The episode begins with the narrative expression Ἦν δὲ and the narrator continues the story by making use of several story-telling techniques. It begins with the introductory statement of the narrator in vv. 1–2a. δὲ a conjunctive participle, marking the superaddition of a clause, whether in opposition or in continuation, to what has preceded, and it may be variously rendered but, on the other hand, and, also, now. Cf. Preschbacher, 1990: 86.

7 In v. 22 readers are brought to the position of a post-resurrection memory of the disciples through a narrative note. John’s post-resurrection narration and perspective is very conspicuous here. Ridderbos (1987/1997: 123; cf. Painter, 1991: 57; Talbert, 1992: 97) suggests that, “The conversation with Nicodemus offers a very specific elaboration of what was said in a more general sense in 2:23–25. In the figure of Nicodemus we are given an illustrative demonstration—perhaps we may say par excellence—of what in the preceding is called ‘the faith’ of the many in Jerusalem who were impressed by the signs that Jesus did.”


10 Resseguie (2005: 113) says that, “Religious days and feasts (Sabbath, Passover, Tabernacles) are settings for healings and for conflicts between Jesus and the authorities.”