



Chapter 6

LEADERSHIP IN A TIME OF CRISIS RE-EVALUATING NICODEMUS (JOHN 3.1-10)

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1. *A Time of Crisis*

While the holy house was on fire, everything was plundered that came to hand, and ten thousand of those that were caught were slain...Nor can one imagine anything either greater or more terrible than this noise...Perea did also return the echo, as well as the mountains round about [the city], and augmented the force of the entire noise. Yet was the misery itself more terrible than this disorder; for one would have thought that the hill itself, on which the temple stood, was seething hot, as full of fire on every part of it, that the blood was larger in quantity than the fire, and those that were slain more in number than those that slew them. (Josephus *B.J.* 6.271-76)

Josephus' graphic description of the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in the year 70 CE conveys the horror of this event, considered by a modern author to be 'the equivalent of a meteorite hitting the earth'.¹ The people, the city, even the mountains cry out as the flames devour God's Holy House. This event, still commemorated each year in the Jewish community on the 9th Ab, marks a watershed in the development of two ancient religions – Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, both of which have their roots in the complex religious practices and beliefs generically called 'Second Temple Judaism'.

1.1 *Christianity and Pharisaic Judaism*

1. D. H. Akenson, *Surpassing Wonder: The Invention of the Bible and the Talmuds* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998) 111.

In his description of first century Judaism prior to the year 70 CE, J. Neusner prefers to speak of Judaisms, rather than one monolithic system,² while D. H. Akenson speaks of the ‘fecundity’ of this period and cites a Talmudic comment ‘that the reason the Chosen People were exiled through the destruction of the Temple, was that there had arisen twenty-four parties of heretics’ (Jer. Tal. Sanhedrin 10.6.29c).³ Some of these groups have left records in historical documents; thus Philo names a group of Therapeutae (Philo *Contempl. Life* 28, 30-31), and Josephus names the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Essenes and a ‘fourth philosophy’ that some consider to be the ‘Zealots’.⁴ In the middle decades of this first century another Jewish group emerged with its focus on the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, claiming that he was the Messiah/the Christ. The followers of Jesus believed that they were living in the last days as spoken of by Israel’s prophets, and, in accordance with ancient prophecies, they opened their movement to include Gentiles. All these groups, no matter their differences, held in common a belief in one God, and in the ancient writings and covenants of Israel. All would have considered themselves inheritors of the promise to Abraham (Gen. 12.1-3). The cataclysmic events of the year 70 CE brought an end to the Temple and to the pluriformity of Second Temple Judaism. As Akenson notes, ‘A temple religion without a temple either had to die or re-invent itself’.⁵ In the decades after the year 70 CE, two groups gradually emerged, both laying claim to be the legitimate heirs of ancient Israel, and both doing this under the shadow of a Temple that no longer existed. Again, quoting D. H. Akenson, ‘In a strikingly parallel fashion, both the Rabbinic Jewish faith and the Christian religion, to use the names they later acquired, were to re-invent the religion of the Temple, without a physical temple being extant’.⁶

1.2 The Gospel of John

2. J. Neusner, ‘Varieties of Judaism in the Formative Age’, in A. Green (ed.), *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible through the Middle Ages* (London: SCM, 1985) 171-97, and idem, *Judaism When Christianity Began: A Survey of Belief and Practice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002) 1-13.

3. Akenson, *Surpassing Wonder*, 133.

4. A helpful summary of the development of these groups within Second Temple Judaism can be found in J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, vol. 3: Companion and Competitors* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 2001) 289-310.

5. Akenson, *Surpassing Wonder*, 212.

6. Akenson, *Surpassing Wonder*, 212.

The Gospel of John was written in this post-70 CE context where nascent Rabbinic Judaism and nascent Christianity were in a process of redefining themselves over against each other. Within Judaism, the group known as the Pharisees, under the leadership of R. Johanan ben Zakkai, set about the task of a major reinterpretation of Jewish traditions and cultic practices.⁷ Christian communities were engaged in the same task. Where the Rabbis turned to the Torah as a means of sanctification, Christians turned to Jesus as the one who fulfilled Israel's promises. With both groups claiming to be the rightful heirs of pre-70 Israel, misunderstandings, tensions and conflicts were inevitable. W. A. Meeks speaks of this time as a 'trauma',⁸ while A. Y. Collins calls it a 'social crisis'.⁹ In the narrative of Nicodemus, readers have an opportunity to 'overhear' a possible conversation between these two groups.¹⁰ Nicodemus is described as a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews (Jn 3.1). In this first encounter he is linked with those with the leadership task of redefining and rebuilding Judaism after the crisis of the year 70.¹¹ Before we listen to his dialogue with Jesus (Jn 3.1-10), I want to bring to the 'listening' some criteria drawn from modern theories of crisis management so that we can evaluate Nicodemus' leadership role.

1.3 Leadership Qualities in Times of Crisis

7. Meier, *Companion and Competitors*, 311-88; C. S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, (2 vols; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), I, 181-85. Keener cautions that no single group 'immediately began to control Palestinian Judaism' (182).

8. Meeks writes, 'coming to faith in Jesus is for the Johannine group a change in social location' and he proposes that the Fourth Gospel 'provided a symbolic universe which gave religious legitimacy, a theodicy, to the group's actual isolation from the larger society'. See W. A. Meeks, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', in J. Ashton (ed.), *The Interpretation of John* (IRT; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) 162, 163.

9. A. Y. Collins, 'Crisis and Community in the Gospel of John', *CTM* 7 (1980) 196-204 (197).

10. A number of scholars have suggested that the Fourth Gospel be read as both a depiction of the ministry of Jesus, and as a reflection of the situation of an early Christian community. See, for example, Meeks, 'The Man from Heaven', 169-205; J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 3rd edn, 2003); and R. E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979).

11. Following a critical analysis of Josephus, the New Testament and the Tannaitic literature, Rivkin argues that these three sources present an independent and identical definition of the Pharisees as 'the authoritative teachers and exponents of the twofold Law... They were leaders and legislators who acted firmly and decisively when their authority and the twofold Law were at stake'. See E. Rivkin, 'Who were the Pharisees?', in J. Neusner and A. J. Avery-Peck (eds), *Judaism in Late Antiquity. Volume 2* (Boston: Brill, 2001) Part 3: Section 3, 1-33 (20).

L. P. Wooten and E. H. James identify 11 competencies needed by leaders if they are to manage a crisis situation effectively. While their study is focused on the business world, the competencies have a more universal relevance for any type of organisation dealing with a crisis. They identify the following traits needed at different stages of a crisis:¹²

1. *Sense making*. What does the event mean?
2. *Perspective taking*. The ability to entertain or assume the perspective of another.
3. *Issue selling*. The ability to be persuasive and influential.
4. *Organisational agility*. Wide knowledge of all aspects of the system.
5. *Creativity*. An ability to imagine in ways that go beyond the traditional thinking.
6. *Decision making under pressure*. In the face of fear and anxiety, the ability to make sound and rapid decisions.
7. *Communicating effectively*. The ability to connect emotionally and psychologically with an audience.
8. *Risk taking*: The ability to be open to creative thinking and innovation.
9. *Promoting organisational resiliency*. Crises can serve as a catalyst for thinking differently about what is possible; to move beyond a 'back to business as usual' attitude.
10. *Acting with integrity*. The ability to engage in ethical decision making and behavior is the foundation for organisational integrity and trust.
11. *Learning orientation*. Learning and reflection.

With these characteristics of good leadership in a time of crisis, I now turn to the first encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus. I read this not as a reconstruction of an actual historical event, but as a theological construct written to confirm the faith of a Christian community, many of whose members are Jews facing a deeply personal crisis of religious identity – do we follow Jesus' disciples, or the Rabbis? By the end of the first century, according to this evangelist, it was no longer possible to be a Christian believer and remain within the Synagogue (Jn 9.22; 12.42; 16.2).¹³ A choice was needed. The encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus dramatically portrays the two poles of this leadership choice.

12. L. P. Wooten and E. H. James, 'Linking Crisis Management and Leadership Competencies: The Role of Human Resource Development', *Advances in Developing Human Resources* 10 (2008) 352-79. Following the listing of these competencies, they will be referred to as (W & J x) where 'x' is the number in this list.

13. I understand this situation not as a universal act of excommunication established by a single authorising body such as the Pharisaic group which met in Yavneh, but rather as

2. Nicodemus and Jesus

Now there was a man (ἄνθρωπος) of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs (σημεῖα) that you do apart from the presence of God.' (3.1-2)

The introduction to Nicodemus links him to the many who were in Jerusalem during the Passover (2.13-25) and who came to believe in Jesus because of the signs he did. There are a number of key words repeated across 2.23–3.2 linking these verses into a single narrative unit: 'person' (ἄνθρωπος), 'signs' as well as the theme of knowledge.¹⁴

When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs (σημεῖα) that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no-one to testify about any person (ἀνθρώπου); for he himself knew what was in a person (ἀνθρώπου). (2.23-25)

Before Nicodemus says anything, he is identified as one whom Jesus finds untrustworthy. Faith based on signs is insufficient.¹⁵ The added information that he came at night is also ominous, suggesting fear of being openly associated a limited and possibly local experience. See A. Y. Collins, 'Crisis and Community in John's Gospel', 198. For the Johannine community, these passages have the important function to develop the community's sense of social identity as part of this Gospel's depiction of Christians as alienated from the wider world, and particularly from the world of Judaism. See the seminal work of W. A. Meeks, 'Breaking Away: Three New Testament Pictures of Christianity's Separation from the Jewish Communities', in J. Neusner and E. Frerichs (eds), *To See Ourselves As Others See Us: Christians, Jews, 'Others' in Late Antiquity* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985) 93-115; and idem, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism'. A study of ancient Christian, Roman and Jewish sources leads C. Setzer to conclude that by the end of the first century these documents 'project no sense that Christians were anything other than Jews with ideas unpopular in some other segment of the Jewish community'. She notes a level of tolerance and even 'benign neglect' by a number of Jewish leaders. See C. Setzer, *Jewish Responses to Early Christians: History and Polemics, 30-150 C.E.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) 166-67. She concludes that Christians began to see themselves as 'other' to Jews some time before Jews began to see Christians as separate. The Gospels are part of a Christian polemic to clarify Christian self-identity and create boundaries between the emerging Christian *Ekklesia* and the Synagogue. It is also possible that the *Birkat Ha-Minim* (Curse against the Heretics) functioned as part of the Jewish polemic to clarify Jewish self-identity in these same circumstances. See the reappraisal of *Birkat Ha-Minim* in J. Marcus, 'Birkat Ha-Minim Revisited', *NTS* 55 (2009) 523-51.

14. Schnackenburg ties 2.23-25 closely to the Nicodemus episode, 'the verses are actually a necessary presupposition (cf. 2.23 with 3.2) or preparation for the dialogue with Nicodemus'; see R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John* (3 vols; London: Burns & Oates, 1968-82) I, 358.

15. Hylén considers that Nicodemus' belief based on signs is not a 'decisively negative'

with Jesus, and aligning Nicodemus with 'darkness' within the Johannine symbolic world where Jesus is the 'light' (8.1).¹⁶ Nicodemus is then introduced as a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus belongs to a group within Judaism who have considered the question of life beyond death and have moved to accepting the idea that God will not permit the just to remain in death forever but will renew their lives at the end of time through bodily resurrection (*B.J.* 2163; *Ant.* 18.14). This theme will emerge in the following dialogue.

2.1. *The Dialogue (Jn 3.2a-10)*

Nicodemus begins the dialogue with a statement:

2. 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no-one can possibly (δύναται)¹⁷ do these signs (σημεῖα) that you do, unless God is with him'.

Nicodemus begins by addressing Jesus as 'Rabbi', a title Nicodemus shares as a 'teacher of Israel' (3.10). Based on the signs he has seen Nicodemus has initial knowledge to understand Jesus as a teacher authorised by God in the manner of the prophets, particularly Moses, whose signs witnessed to their divine commission.¹⁸ While Nicodemus speaks of Jesus as a teacher 'coming from God', he is not fully aware of the truth of his words; the reader knows Jesus has come 'from God' (Jn 1.1) in a way that Nicodemus has not yet grasped.

These opening words exhibit two characteristics of good leadership in a

quality. See S. E. Hylan, *Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) 27. To the contrary, the evangelist's comment that Jesus did not trust himself to them pronounces his judgement on this type of faith as inadequate. Others also see his faith as insufficient and limited; see R. F. Collins, *These Things Have Been Written: Studies on the Fourth Gospel* (Louvain: Pecters, 1990) 56-67; and F. J. Moloney, *John* (SP, 4; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998) 91.

16. As Meeks notes, Nicodemus' description as one coming by night, later repeated (19.39) 'casts a certain suspicion over him, because of what is said in the dialogue itself about the division between people who come to the light and those who remain in darkness (3.19-21)'; Meeks, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', 148-49.

17. The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus is held together by the repetition of the word δύναται which I have translated using 'possible' and its negative form 'impossible'.

18. 'In the account of Exodus, the miracles which Moses must do are called 'signs' in the Hebrew text (מוֹפְתִים) as well as in the Septuagint (σημεῖον). They must, in effect, constitute the 'signs' that Moses had indeed been sent by God'. See M.-É. Boismard, *Moses or Jesus: An Essay in Johannine Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 56.

19. 'His opening words...represent also the courtesy from one teacher to another'; so D. A. Lee, *The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel: The Interplay of Form and*

crisis (W & J 1 & 7). Nicodemus tries to make sense of what he has experienced of Jesus during Passover. He has seen the signs, and based on his knowledge of the Scriptures, he has concluded that Jesus is a teacher sent by God. Situating Jesus within the traditions of Israel can defuse any sense of threat that his teaching and actions might arouse. By naming Jesus, 'Rabbi', Nicodemus tries to establish a bond of mutuality – we are both teachers of Israel.¹⁹ Good leaders communicate in a way that connects 'emotionally and psychologically with an audience', and attempts 'to restore calm or provide reassurance'.²⁰

Jesus' response challenges Nicodemus to go beyond his preconceived categories of understanding him as a 'teacher of Israel' only in terms of a 'sign-prophet' in the Mosaic tradition. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus is open to the possibility of the renewal of life through bodily resurrection *at the end of time*; Jesus invites Nicodemus to consider the possibility of 'rebirth' *in time* as the means of seeing the reign of God, the presence of God now incarnate in history.

3. Jesus answered him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew (ἄνωθεν) it is not possible (δύναται) to see the kingdom of God'.

The term ἄνωθεν can function as both an adverb of place and an adverb of time. It can mean 'from above', and it can mean 'from an earlier time', hence 'again', or 'anew';²¹ the meaning here (v. 3) is probably 'born anew' rather than 'born from above'.²² Nicodemus understands ἄνωθεν in a temporal sense but rather than understand this metaphorically he interprets Jesus' words literally and speaks of being born a second time (δεύτερον).

4. Nicodemus said to him, 'How is it possible (πῶς δύναται) for a man to be born when he is old? It is not possible (μὴ δύναται) to enter into the womb of his mother a second time (δεύτερον) and be born'.

Meaning (JSNTSup, 95; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 39.

20. Wooten and James, 'Linking Crisis Management and Leadership Competencies'.

21. F. Büchsel, ἄνωθεν, TDNT (1964-76), I, 378.

22. See the very detailed arguments given by Belleville for this approach; L. Belleville, "'Born of Water and Spirit": John 3.5', *Trinity Journal* 1 (1980) 125-41 (138 n. 75). This same article provides an excellent synopsis of the variety of interpretations that Belleville describes as ritualistic, symbolic, physiological, dualistic, cosmological and figurative. Jones also supports this reading of 'born anew' noting that 'misunderstandings based on "misplaced literalness" characterize the Fourth Gospel'. See L. P. Jones, *The Symbol of Water in the Gospel of John* (JSNTSup, 145; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 69.

23. Wooten and James, 'Linking Crisis Management and Leadership Competencies'.

24. A. D. Galinsky and G. B. Moskowitz, 'Perspective-Taking: Decreasing Stereotype

Nicodemus' response shows his inability to genuinely engage Jesus. He begins by asking open ended questions, 'How can one be born if one is old? How is it possible'? The question is appropriate and seeks further understanding of what Jesus might mean by 'born'. At this stage he is inviting further conversation, but then he answers his own question with a statement that effectively closes the discussion – 'it is not possible' (3.4b). Rather than stay with the question and the possibility that there might be a deeper meaning to Jesus' words, Nicodemus states a fact based on a literal understanding of birth and offers the impossible scenario of an adult re-entering the mother's womb.

In this exchange Nicodemus is shown to lack a key competency of leadership for crisis management, namely perspective taking (W & J 2).²³ This ability 'to entertain the perspective of another has long been recognised as a critical ingredient in proper social functioning'.²⁴ Nicodemus is locked within his own literalist perception and is unable to appreciate the symbolic sense of Jesus' words.²⁵

The misunderstanding between Jesus and Nicodemus is not so much about the meaning of ἄνωθεν but about what Jesus means by birth.²⁶ Nicodemus understands Jesus literally, as speaking of biological birth; Jesus is speaking of a different type of birth, a second birth by the agency of the Spirit as he clarifies in the following verses.²⁷

5. Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, it is not possible to enter into the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit (πνεύματος) is spirit'.

Expression, Stereotype Accessibility, and In-Group Favoritism', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78 (2000) 708-24 (712).

25. Lee, *Symbolic Narratives*, 48-49, 55.

26. Scholars are divided on the issue of whether the misunderstanding of Nicodemus is to be found in the two possible meanings of ἄνωθεν, (from above, again), or on the meaning of rebirth. With Witherington, (B. Witherington, 'The Waters of Birth: John 3.5 and 1 John 5.6-8', *NTS* 35 [1989] 155-60 [159]) and Schneiders, (S. M. Schneiders, *Written that You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* [New York: Crossroad, 1999] 120), I place the confusion with the meaning of 'born anew'. As Schneiders notes, if Nicodemus had understood Jesus at this point to mean 'born from above', he would not have responded with the grotesque image of re-entering the mother's womb. Nicodemus has understood the expression to mean born again, which he then takes literally. See also the reasons for this reading in the preceding footnote.

27. Being born of the Spirit (γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος, 3.5, 6, 8) echoes the promise of the Prologue that believers would become children of God, being born of God (ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν, 1.13).

28. Understanding 'of water' to refer to physical birth, means that this phrase need not be interpreted as a reference to baptism and thus seen as the work of a later redactor

In speaking of being born of water and the Spirit (v. 5), Jesus is referring to two types of birth;²⁸ the first is natural or biological birth achieved with the release of the mother's amniotic fluid (birth by water);²⁹ the second is the spiritual birth of the believer brought about through the gift of the Spirit. The first birth gives access to biological life (βίος) which is mortal (of the flesh).³⁰ The second birth draws one into the life (ζωή) of the Spirit.³¹ The principle stated in verse 6 shows clearly that Jesus distinguishes between two types of birth, natural and spiritual.

6. That which is born of the flesh is flesh,
And that which is born of the Spirit (πνεύματος) is spirit.

Jesus then offers Nicodemus a parable, perhaps in an attempt to move him from his literalism.

7. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be *born anew* (ἄνωθεν)'. 8. The wind/spirit (πνεῦμα) blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is *born of the Spirit*.

as Bultmann proposes; see R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971) 138-39 n. 3. This is not to deny that a Christian community did not see in this text an allusion to their baptismal rituals, but that its first meaning is to be sought in the natural realm. As Lee writes, 'It is likely that water, as a symbol, evokes both birth and baptism in this passage, the text making no attempt to delimit the symbolic meaning. While Christian baptism is not the primary focus of the dialogue, John's symbolism is evocative in a number of directions and suggests a wider field of meaning'; D. A. Lee, *Flesh and Glory: Symbolism, Gender and Theology in the Gospel of John* (New York: Crossroad, 2002) 71. Also Jones, *The Symbol of Water in the Gospel of John*, 76: 'Although the practice of baptism may stand somewhere behind the text, nothing stated by the narrator or by Jesus makes an association with baptism concrete'. For a discussion of criteria for reading passages sacramentally see F. J. Moloney, 'When is John Talking about Sacraments?', *ABR* 30 (1982) 10-33.

29. 'One needs to be aware that in ancient Near Eastern literature the word 'water' can be and is used as a *terminus technicus*, or at least a well-known circumlocution, for matters involving procreation, child-bearing, child-bearing capacity or the act of giving birth itself': Witherington, 'The Waters of Birth: John 3.5 and 1 John 5.6-8', 156. See this article for further examples of 'water' used as a reference to childbirth. See also Schneiders, *Written that You May Believe*, 120; and Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 68-71.

30. Flesh in this context refers to creatureliness, the mortal nature of the human person. 'By becoming flesh, God enters the world in the thin garb of mortality, entering the darkness of creation clad only in the armor of skin and vein, sinew and bone: mortal, vulnerable, named'. For a very rich examination of the Johannine use of the term 'flesh', see Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, Chapter 1. The quotation is from page 50.

31. The term βίος/life is never used in this Gospel, but the term ζωή/life is consistently used: e.g. 1.4; 3.15, 16, 36; 4.14, 36; 5.24, 26, 29, 39, 40; 6.27, 33, 35, 40, 47, 48, 51, 53, 54, 63, 68; 8.12; 10.10, 28; 11.25; 12.25, 50; 14.6; 17.2, 3; 20.31.

32. Τὴν φωνὴν αὐτοῦ (Jn 3.8).

33. The Sadducees did not survive the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE and Meier

The parable of the wind, points to the sensible reality of birth in the Spirit, even though there is mystery surrounding it. Without clearly knowing the coming and going of the wind, one can hear it. The text actually reads, ‘you hear the voice of it’ (v. 8).³² For one born of the Spirit (πνεῦμα) it is possible to hear the voice of the spirit/wind (πνεῦμα). The parable about the wind sits within an *inclusio* about birth, and the parallelism attests to the equivalence of the expressions – ‘born anew’ (v. 7) and ‘born of the Spirit’ (v. 8). Nicodemus responds with the question he asked in verse 4a, ‘How is this possible (πῶς δύναται) for these things to happen?’ (v. 9). Jesus replies with telling irony, echoing Nicodemus’ own words describing Jesus as a teacher come from God (v. 2) – ‘You are a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not know this?’ (v. 10).

The dialogue has come to its conclusion by showing up the failure of ‘the teacher of Israel’ to comprehend the ‘teacher come from God’. In the context of post-70 CE Judaism this brief dialogue highlights the crisis of decision and identity faced by both Jews and Christians. Who will provide correct teaching? The Pharisees emerged from the destruction of Jerusalem as one indentifiable group who could step into the leadership vacuum created by the loss of the Temple and with it the priesthood.³³ The Johannine community is being challenged to recognise Jesus as the one who can rightfully claim to be the teacher come from God and so able to interpret correctly Israel’s Scriptures in a new Temple-less situation.

2.2 Leadership in Crisis: Assessing Nicodemus

Nicodemus begins well. Addressing Jesus as ‘Rabbi’ and acknowledging him as a ‘teacher’ indicates an attempt to establish a tone of mutual respect and a desire to connect. But Nicodemus has not fully grasped the meaning of Jesus’ actions in Jerusalem. Nicodemus’ perception is limited to understanding Jesus in terms of the signs he has displayed (3.2), but the narrator has already indicated that this is insufficient (2.23-24). The signs lead Nicodemus to recognise that God is with Jesus, as God was said to be with Moses (Ex. 3.12) and Jeremiah (Jer. 1.8) but he has failed to understand the meaning of Jesus’ Temple action or his words when he renames the Temple, ‘my Father’s House’

suggests that this may be ‘because most of them remained in the city, struggling with other Jewish factions while fighting the Romans till the bitter end’; see Meier, *Companion and Competitors*, 393.

34. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St John* (London: SPCK, 2nd edn, 1978) 203.

(2.16). Jesus' words and actions in the Temple should have led Nicodemus to a deeper perception of Jesus' relationship with God than simply a sign prophet. Nicodemus' effort to make sense of Jesus has been inadequate and this has implications for the ensuing dialogue.

Further key requirements for leadership in a time of crisis are wide knowledge of the system (W & J 4) and the creative ability to go beyond the traditional thinking (W & J 5). As C. K. Barrett correctly states: 'Nicodemus is uncomprehending and incredulous in spite of his professional knowledge of the Old Testament which should have prepared him for its fulfillment'.³⁴ When Jesus used the phrase, 'the kingdom of God' (3.3), Nicodemus, the Pharisee and teacher of the Torah, should have recognised the expression and its context in the Book of Wisdom:³⁵ 'When a righteous man fled from his brother's wrath, she guided him on straight paths; she showed him the kingdom of God, and gave him knowledge of angels' (Wis. 10.10). This passage recalls Jacob's flight from Laban and his dream at Bethel (Gen. 28.10-17), described here as a vision of the kingdom of God. The Book of Wisdom, although late in the Scriptures of Israel,³⁶ is one that a Pharisee could be expected to know since this book is one of the rare Old Testament texts to explore the possibility of life after death, which is one of the distinguishing beliefs of the Pharisees.³⁷ According to Josephus, the Pharisees 'say that all souls are incorruptible' (*B.J.* 2.163), and 'also believe that souls have an immortal vigor in them' (*Ant.* 18.14). This language of immortality and incorruptibility aligns the Pharisees with the eschatological and anthropological outlook of the Book of Wisdom.

35. The Book of Wisdom is the only Old Testament (LXX) book to use the phrase, 'the kingdom of God'. While not in the Hebrew books of the Old Testament, the concept is found in the writings from Qumran and a number of scholars think that the phrase *raz nihyey* (רַז נִהְיֶי) found in the Dead Sea Scrolls is equivalent. Following a lengthy discussion of this phrase in the Scrolls, J. Ashton states, 'I believe that the term implies the same sort of inaugurated eschatology as the Gospel phrase 'kingdom of God'. See J. Ashton, "'Mystery" in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Fourth Gospel', in M. L. Coloe and T. Thatcher (eds), *John, Qumran, and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Sixty Years of Discovery and Debate* (Early Judaism and Its Literature, 32; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011) 53-68 (58).

36. Collins suggests that the Book of Wisdom was written in Alexandria between 30 BCE and 70 CE. See J. J. Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997) 179. There is growing interest in Sapiential writings; the significant amount of Wisdom material found in the Scrolls, and similar concepts to those found in the Book of Wisdom, may provide earlier dating. For a discussion of the Wisdom material in the Scrolls, see M. Goff, 'Recent Trends in the Study of Early Jewish Wisdom Literature: The Contribution of 4QInstruction and Other Qumran Texts', *CBR* 7 (2009) 376-416.

37. Other Old Testament texts to explore issues of the afterlife include Dan. 12.2-3; 2 Macc. 7.9, 14.

38. D. Winston, *Wisdom of Solomon* (AB, 43; New York: Doubleday, 1979) 29-30.

39. L. G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville:

When considering human existence, the author of Wisdom presents an interpretation of the two creation accounts in Genesis 1-3. Because human beings are made in the image of God (Wis. 2.23) they can participate in God's immortality, if they choose the path of righteousness, 'But the righteous live forever (εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα ζῶσιν), and their reward is with the Lord; the Most High takes care of them' (Wis. 5.15).³⁸ God's own incorruptible Spirit (Wis. 12.1) maintains life and is God's gift to the righteous (Wis. 8.21) allowing them to enjoy life forever 'in the hand of God' (Wis. 3.1). Life, properly understood, is more than mere existence; it is communion with God enjoyed by the just (Wis. 4.10-14) and physical death neither destroys nor interrupts this. In fact, for the righteous physical demise is not really death, for they only 'seem to die' (Wis. 3.2). Against this large horizon of the possibility of immortal life and the possibility of death, the Wisdom writer urges his audience to choose the way of righteousness as the choice for eternal life. Therefore, human beings exist now participating in either eternal life,³⁹ or eternal death.

Jesus' opening words to Nicodemus suggest that he recognises Nicodemus as a Pharisee and presumes therefore that he is open to consider possibilities of eternal life as a gift experienced *now*, in this mortal life, and extending beyond the grave. But as the Book of Wisdom notes, this quality of life is not possessed by humanity as a right; it is a divine gift. Ordinary human life is mortal.

I also am mortal, like all men... When I was born, I began to breathe the common air, and fell upon the kindred earth, and my first sound was a cry, like that of all... there is for all humankind one entrance into life, and a common departure. (Wis. 7.1-6)

But the spirit of Wisdom comes as a gift from God (Wis. 7.7) and as 'a breath of the power of God' (Wis. 7.25). Through wisdom comes 'immortality' (Wis. 8.13). 'Giving heed to her laws is assurance of immortality, and immortality brings one near to God; so the desire for wisdom leads to a kingdom' (Wis. 6.18-20).

Read against the background of the Book of Wisdom and its anthropology, Jesus' words to Nicodemus, the Pharisee, have a narrative logic.⁴⁰ Nicodemus has come to Jesus because he has seen signs and has on this basis concluded that Jesus is a teacher 'come from God'. Jesus' response asks him to 'see' deeper than this; he is invited to 'see the kingdom of God' as Jacob once saw

Abingdon, 1994) 301.

40. Hakola typifies the many scholars who cannot see the link between Nicodemus' words and Jesus' reply, and judge Jesus' response as 'cruel', and a 'surprisingly harsh

this kingdom (Wis. 10.10) now accessible in Jesus. Such seeing requires more than physical birth; such seeing necessitates being 'born anew'. As a Pharisee, versed in the Scriptures and having a belief in immortality akin to that of the Book of Wisdom described above, Nicodemus could be expected to have some insight into the meaning of Jesus' words.

Nicodemus' response about returning to a mother's womb indicates his lack of knowledge of a basic idea in Pharisaic Judaism (W & J 4), and a lack of imagination to understand Jesus' words metaphorically (W & J 5). As a leader within the world of Pharisaic Judaism Nicodemus begins the dialogue and initially shows signs of good leadership (W & J 1 & 7), but as the discussion continues his leadership skills falter and he fails to show a number of key competencies required for dealing with a crisis (W & J 2, 4, 5).

2.3 Nicodemus in Later Chapters

When Nicodemus returns to the narrative in Chapter 7 a further aspect of his character is revealed that speaks well for his leadership qualities. During the festival of Tabernacles the opposition to Jesus has increased to the point that the Pharisees send officers to arrest Jesus (7.32). These officers are swayed by his teaching and return without him. The Pharisees then ask, 'Are you also led astray?' (7.47). At this point Nicodemus speaks up to ask about lawful procedures, 'Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?' (7.51). Nicodemus' concern for just procedures evidences his ability to act with integrity (W & J 10) and to make a decision under pressure in the face of opposition (W & J 6). Furthermore, Nicodemus goes beyond the literal requirement of the Jewish legal system; 'No legal precept in the OT or rabbinic Judaism demands that the accused be heard and that the accuser come to know what he does. Nicodemus enunciates a new understanding of the Law'.⁴¹ By asking the Pharisees to listen to Jesus' words and to examine his deeds Nicodemus challenges them to think differently and to go beyond their current legal parameters (W & J 9). In the language of L. P. Wooten and E. H. James, he is 'promoting organizational resiliency'.⁴² At this point, Nicodemus is still identified as 'one of them' (7.50) and so

and uncompromising censure'. See R. Hakola, 'The Burden of Ambiguity: Nicodemus and the Social Identity of the Johannine Christians', *NTS* 55 (2009) 438-55 (449). The key to understanding Jesus' response is Nicodemus' identity as a Pharisee and therefore a presumption of his interest in 'immortality'.

41. Moloney, *John*, 255.

42. Wooten and James, 'Linking Crisis Management and Leadership Competencies',

potentially able to exert influence within this group. But as the response by the Pharisees shows, he fails to be persuasive (W & J 3). They respond by abusing him and questioning his knowledge of the Scriptures. 'Search and you will see that no prophet is to rise from Galilee' (7.52). Nicodemus has no further words, but this is the last time he is identified as a Pharisee. Within this group, his attempt at leadership on points of Law has failed and this marks a turning point for Nicodemus. Although nothing more is revealed about his thought processes, when he next appears in the narrative he is no longer with the Pharisees but with a 'disciple of Jesus' (19.38), albeit a secret disciple.

The final scene with Nicodemus follows the crucifixion when he and Joseph of Arimathea take the body of Jesus, anoint it and place it in the tomb. Nicodemus is the one who brings the large amount of spices, 'a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight' (19.39). Where, on his first appearance, Nicodemus came under the secrecy of darkness, now he appears publicly and reverences the body of Jesus with an amount of spices fit for a king.⁴³ These actions testify to a major shift vis-à-vis the Pharisees and vis-à-vis Jesus. Across the narrative he has changed from misunderstanding and secrecy in Chapter 3 to a public gesture which clearly aligns him with Jesus.⁴⁴ This final action shows a high degree of courage to take a risk (W & J 8), and his ability to reflect and learn from experience (W & J 11). Jesus' first words to Nicodemus were an invitation to 'see the kingdom of God' (3.3). In Chapter 3 this invitation was met with confusion and a literalist understanding of what it meant to be 'born anew'. Nicodemus, the Pharisee, was unable to grasp what Jesus was offering. In his final action, he is no longer described as one of the Pharisees (7.50); now he is linked with a disciple of Jesus (19.38); and now, it would seem from the amount of anointing spices he brings, Nicodemus has come to recognise 'the kingdom' in Jesus.

We hear nothing more of Nicodemus. The rest of the New Testament is silent and so we do not know if the faith shown by Nicodemus in Jesus' burial leads to further leadership in the post-resurrection group of disciples. We know from

258.

43. Moloney, *John*, 510; similarly Barrett who notes that Herod the Great was buried with an enormous amount of aromatic oils and spices; Barrett, *The Gospel according to St John*, 960.

44. Culpepper assesses Nicodemus' actions here in a negative light because he is associated with Joseph of Arimathea who is described as a secret disciple for fear of the Jews (19.38); R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 136; but as Hylan notes (*Imperfect Believers*, 35), 'the request for Jesus' body and his burial are public acts'.

45. 'Nicodemus...represents the "Jewish Leadership"...He is presented both as an individual and as a representative of the group to which he belongs (see 7.45-52)...

the example of Paul of at least one other Pharisee who came to believe in Jesus and then assumed a leadership role within the community.

3. Conclusion

Nicodemus is frequently described as an ambiguous character and this assessment is usually made against the criterion of 'belief in Jesus' and interpreting Nicodemus as a character, representative of secret believers whose faith is ultimately judged to be inadequate; but when he is first introduced he quite clearly is named as a Pharisee and one among the leadership group within Judaism (3.1). In the portrayal of Nicodemus, taking explicit clues given in the text, I propose that Nicodemus is a representative of Pharisaic Judaism, the group within the multiple forms of first-century Judaism that ultimately emerges in a leadership role to deal with the crisis of Judaism without a Temple. This chapter has therefore, evaluated Nicodemus against the criterion of his leadership skills.⁴⁵

When measured against key competencies needed for leadership in a time of crisis, as described by Wooten and James, Nicodemus shows great potential. Positively, he is revealed as a man who reflects on and tries to make sense of his experience. In the face of opposition, even from within his own religious party, he can be decisive and challenging. When confronting a new situation he attempts to connect with his dialogue partner, and he is able to re-evaluate and take risks. At a key point in the narrative he proposes a different approach to the usual legal processes; his approach is innovative and could enable greater resiliency during a time of crisis. Across the entire narrative he is depicted as a man of integrity seeking out Jesus in Jerusalem and engaging with him, speaking up for due legal process and finally seeing to the proper burial of one executed as a criminal by Rome.

Negatively, in the first encounter he is unable to shift from his literalism to take the perspective of Jesus, a position he could have been expected to comprehend because of his Pharisaic background. As a Pharisee he should know the Scriptures and so recognise Jesus' allusion to seeing 'the kingdom of God' found only in the Book of Wisdom. Also, being a member of a group who believe in a life that continues beyond death, which is also an anthropological

Nicodemus and the Judaism he represents are confronted by the shining of the light and faced with the choice (κρίσις) between life and death'; Lee, *Symbolic Narratives*, 56.

46. Cited in, J. Brockner and E. H. James, 'Toward an Understanding of When Executives See Crisis as Opportunity', *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 44 (2008)

perspective unique to the Book of Wisdom, he could have been expected to engage with Jesus' metaphor of being 'born anew', through a birth that is more than physical birth through water, but requires being 'born of the Spirit'. Nicodemus' consistent reply to Jesus is to doubt and deny this possibility. 'How is it possible?' (3.4a, 9b) and 'It is not possible' (3.4b).

He fares no better in his second encounter with Jesus when he is once again described as being one of the Pharisees (7.50). Nicodemus' attempt to insist on treating Jesus with proper legal processes meets with derision. The very Law that the Pharisees insist on, the twofold law of the written Scriptures and the oral traditions of the fathers, is ignored. The Pharisees revert to evaluating Jesus' claims solely in terms of the written Law, citing this as evidence that no prophet arises from Galilee (7.52). Arguably, his greatest failure as a leader lies in his inability to be persuasive and to influence other members of his party to consider the Law in both its written and oral form.

According to the American Heritage Dictionary, crises are defined as 'unstable conditions, as in political, social or economic affairs, involving abrupt or decisive changes'.⁴⁶ The events of the year 70 CE created such unstable conditions in all these aspects of life in Judea and to this list could be added religious affairs. In such a time of crisis strong leadership was necessary. With no Temple, priesthood or sacrifice how could Second Temple Judaism survive? In discussing the various responses to this crisis J. Neusner identifies four different trajectories: an apocalyptic movement, the Qumran community, Christianity and Pharisaic Judaism.⁴⁷ Of these, only Christianity and Pharisaic Judaism survived.⁴⁸ To answer the question – where can God be encountered? – the Pharisees at Yavneh sought wisdom in the Torah while the Christian community looked to Jesus.⁴⁹ In the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus we overhear a discussion between two teachers of these groups. In spite of his education in Torah and a degree of receptivity to Jesus, Nicodemus fails to comprehend Jesus' teaching about being reborn to see the kingdom of God. Jesus has the final word in this dialogue and he questions Nicodemus' qualifications

94-115 (94-95).

47. J. Neusner, 'Judaism in a Time of Crisis: Four Responses to the Destruction of the Second Temple', *Judaism* 21 (1972) 313-27.

48. The shift from Pharisaic to Rabbinic Judaism in the final decades of the first century is described thus by Meier: 'After the war, the Pharisees coalesced with other devout and studious Jews at Yavneh to form the beginnings of the rabbinic movement. In due course, the leader of this movement (the *nāsī* or 'patriarch') gained a certain amount of recognition from the Roman government. By that time, however, the Pharisees as a distinct group had receded into past history even as their spiritual heirs and continuators, the rabbis, began to gain control of Palestinian Judaism'. See Meier, *Companion and Competitors*, 331-32; also Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 183-84; and Rivkin, 'Who were the Pharisees?', 29-30.

49. According to Carter one of the key issues in post-70 CE Judaism was where wisdom is to be found, 'where God in God's knowability, visibility and audibility was to be

to be a teacher and leader of Israel. From this Gospel's perspective, the choice between leaders in this time of crisis is clear. For Nicodemus, and the Judaism of the Pharisees which he represents, the vision of the kingdom of God 'is not possible'.

encountered'. See W. Carter, 'The Prologue and John's Gospel: Function, Symbol and the Definitive Word', *JSNT* 39 (1990) 35-58 (47).

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