

# Johannine Christology through the Lens of Three of Its Dialogues

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In comparison with the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Gospel of John has a very different interpretive lens through which it answers the age-old question “Who is Jesus?” The Gospel itself identifies its purpose: “These are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (John 20:31). While many individuals in the Synoptic Gospels declare Jesus to be the Son of God, there are very few accounts of Jesus himself declaring so until the latter part of his ministry. In this respect, John’s Gospel is very different because in it Jesus makes frequent declarations about his divine status throughout his entire ministry.<sup>1</sup> Thus John’s Gospel is frequently described as having a high Christology, and Clement of Alexandria identified it as “a spiritual gospel.”<sup>2</sup>

The Gospel’s introductory prologue declares Jesus to be the eternal Word who, in the premortal realm, was not only with God but

“was God” (John 1:1). This Divine Word was then the God who “was made flesh” (1:14). John the Baptist, recognizing that this unique combination of divinity and flesh separated Jesus from him and the rest of humanity, declared, “He that cometh from above [Greek, *anōthen*] is above all: he that is of the earth is earthly, and speaketh of the earth: he that cometh from heaven is above all” (3:31; see also 8:23).<sup>3</sup> John’s statement was not meant to denigrate humanity, but it does highlight the “otherness” of Jesus and helps readers understand why so many people in the Gospel of John misunderstood Jesus’s teachings. His audiences were “earthly” and spoke “of the earth,” terms that become both synonyms of and symbols to describe those who lack the eternal perspective necessary to fully understand the implications of Jesus’s status as God even though he “was made flesh.”

One of the strategies John’s Gospel employs to reinforce this high Christology is its repeated use of dialogues. It has been calculated that more than half of Jesus’s direct speech in John’s Gospel is found in these dialogues.<sup>4</sup> Whereas the Synoptic Gospels, with a few exceptions, concentrate on Jesus’s “short, pithy sayings and parables,” John’s Gospel emphasizes Jesus’s teachings through dialogues with those “whose misunderstandings further the conversation and enable Jesus to develop his theological teaching in more detail.”<sup>5</sup> These dialogues function in two major ways. First, they serve to draw in and engage Jesus’s dialogue partners so they can move beyond their “earthly” perspective and recognize that he “cometh from above.” Second, the dialogues also provide an important forum for Jesus to declare his own divine status. Thus they function as a major platform for much of the Christology found in this Gospel.

In this paper we will examine these functions by reviewing three of the Johannine dialogues: Jesus’s dialogues with Nicodemus (John 3:1–21), with the Samaritan woman at the well (4:5–29), and with the man born blind (9:1–38). Although these are not the only dialogues that function in these ways,<sup>6</sup> I have chosen them because they have points of continuity with each other that reinforce the overall christological emphasis of John’s Gospel and because they each bring

unique elements that enrich the overall christological tapestry. It is hoped that by recognizing the christological focus in these dialogues, modern readers will be better equipped to recognize the nuances of John's witness that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

### Jesus's Dialogue with Nicodemus (John 3:1–21)

Jesus's dialogue with Nicodemus "is the first extended discourse in the Fourth Gospel."<sup>7</sup> We know little about the man himself. He is mentioned only three times in the New Testament, all of which are in John's Gospel. In those three accounts, as we shall see, he is somewhat of an enigmatic figure.<sup>8</sup> Before the actual dialogue begins, the narrative alerts the reader to the tentative and seemingly fragile nature of Nicodemus's commitment to Jesus and lays the groundwork for his limited perspective and for why he struggles to understand both who Jesus is and what he is trying to teach.

First, John describes Nicodemus as a "man of the Pharisees" and a "ruler of the Jews" (John 3:1). Clearly he is someone of stature in the Jewish community, a representative of the leadership, though John's use of the term "the Jews" (Greek, *hoi Ioudaioi*) is often problematic. However, as Jouette M. Bassler has noted, even this early in John's Gospel, the term "Jews" has more to do with a lack of receptivity to Jesus than it does with national or religious identity (see, for example, John 1:19, 24, 26; 2:18).<sup>9</sup>

Second, although we know little about why he came looking for Jesus, Nicodemus appears to have been among those who had "believed" (Greek, *episteusan*) when they saw the miracles Jesus performed during the first Passover of his ministry (John 2:23; compare 3:2). At first glance a reader could reasonably consider this belief to be a positive attribute. This seems to have been the case for the disciples who "believed on him" (again, Greek, *episteusan*) after witnessing the miracle of turning water into wine (2:11). In this instance, there is no indication that Jesus questioned their faith. But John quickly distances the two groups. He records that Jesus did not reciprocate the

trust (Greek, *episteusan*) of the believers who were at the Passover “because he knew all men” (2:24). The sense of this statement seems clear: Jesus had reservations about the motives behind their belief. In his encounter with Nathaniel, Jesus had already shown that he could read people’s hearts. Even before he met Nathaniel, Jesus declared that he was “an Israelite [note, he does not call him a Jew] indeed, in whom is no guile” (1:47). Whatever Jesus saw in the hearts of this group of believers, he knew that their level of belief was not equivalent to that of the disciples in John 2:11, nor was it developed sufficiently for them to receive “power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe [Greek, *tois pisteuousin*] on his name” (1:12).<sup>10</sup>

A third clue that suggests Nicodemus’s limited perspective is the seemingly innocuous statement that he came to Jesus “by night.” This phrase is more important than just indicating time. The contrast between light and darkness is an important theme frequently woven throughout John’s narrative. It is introduced in the Gospel’s prologue: “In him [i.e., the Word] was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not” (John 1:4–5). The Greek word which the King James Bible renders as “comprehended” is *katalambanō*, which frequently has the sense of pursuing something in order to gain control of it.<sup>11</sup> The word can thus be translated as “seize,” and hence the phrase could also be translated like this: “and the darkness could not seize the light.” John’s Gospel repeatedly describes Jesus as the “light of the world” (John 8:12; 1:8–9; 9:5; 12:35–36, 46). Latter-day Saints understand that in the premortal world there was a war in heaven whereby Satan (as represented by darkness) could not seize or overcome the light. Darkness, therefore, is frequently used as a symbol in John’s Gospel for those who, in mortality, continue the attempt to overcome the light. Thus, while Nicodemus seems to have been genuinely intrigued by Jesus’s miracles, the narrative indicates that he was not yet ready to openly confess and give his loyalty to Jesus. He still valued the things of the world and probably did not wish to incur the condemnation of his peers by seeking out Jesus during the day. Such an assessment

of Nicodemus's actions seems warranted by Jesus's condemnation of those who seek darkness later in the chapter: "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God" (3:19–21).<sup>12</sup> At the end of the Gospel, the fact that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night is how he is identified when he comes with Joseph of Arimathea to procure Jesus's body: "And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night" (19:39).

Fourth, having seen the miracles, Nicodemus declares to Jesus, "Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher [Greek, *didaskalos*] come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him" (John 3:2). In this one statement Nicodemus shows that he does not understand who Jesus is, at least in the Johannine context. His use of the title *rabbi* is certainly a title of respect, used by others in John's Gospel (see John 1:38, 49; 6:25). But it is "a partial confession of faith."<sup>13</sup> Nicodemus's lack of understanding is highlighted in the contrast between his definition and that of Philip. Whereas Nicodemus uses *rabbi* as a title for "a teacher who comes from God," Philip uses it as a title for the "Son of God" (1:49). While it is clearly evident in John's Gospel that Jesus *is* indeed a teacher, what Nicodemus fails to realize as he approaches Jesus is that he is much more than that. As we have learned in the introductory prologue, Jesus is not just sent from God—he is the Word who was not only with God in the premortal realm but who was in fact God.

Understanding all of Nicodemus's limitations, Jesus nevertheless chose to engage him in a dialogue in an effort to help him raise his limited "earthly" perspective and begin to see Jesus from an eternal perspective. Jesus begins this dialogue with a discussion about entrance into the kingdom of God. "Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). The Greek word translated

as “again” is *anōthen*. While it can refer to a repeated action, it is the same word used later in chapter 3 to describe Jesus as being “from above” (3:31; 19:11), as we have noted. As one who is “of the earth . . . and speaketh of the earth,” Nicodemus misunderstands the spiritual intent of Jesus’s statement and interprets *anōthen* according to the first definition: “How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” (John 3:4). So Jesus clarifies the spiritual intent of his teaching: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (3:5–6).

Thus Jesus teaches Nicodemus that to be born “from above” is to be born of both water and the spirit. Seeing miracles was an important experience that led Nicodemus to seek out Jesus, but Jesus wants more for him. He wants Nicodemus to transition from being a spectator watching Jesus’s miracles to one who enters and becomes a part of the kingdom of God. This type of transition is facilitated not just by the ordinance of baptism—that only enables a person to “see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Rather, to be fully engaged in the kingdom, one needs a baptism that is sanctified by the outpouring of the Spirit. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that principle this way: you “might as well baptise a bag of sand as a man if not done in view of the getting of the Holy ghost.— baptism by water is but 1/2 a baptism.— & is good for nothi[n]g with[out] the other.—the Holy Gho[s]t.”<sup>14</sup>

This process is not something immediately tangible, but its effects are nevertheless apparent. Using a play on words that is not discernible in the English translation, Jesus continues: “Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again [Greek, *anōthen*]. The wind [Greek, *pneuma*] bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit [Greek, *pneuma*]” (John 3:7–8). Thus, as one scholar has noted, “The effects of the Spirit’s work can be discerned in creating the children of God, those who ‘believe in his name,’” mentioned in John’s prologue (1:12–13).<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, Nicodemus still struggles to understand Jesus's teaching. "How can these things be?" (John 3:9). He is so mired in his earthly experience that he is "incapable of grasping Jesus's words about rebirth."<sup>16</sup> Jesus responds to Nicodemus, "Art thou the teacher [Greek, *ho didaskalos*] of Israel, and knowest not these things?" (3:10; my translation). The definite article suggests that Nicodemus represents all the teachers of Israel who "speaketh of the earth." It is not just he who fails to understand. Jesus continues, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven" (3:11–13). Neither Nicodemus nor any other teacher can understand the things of heaven, including understanding who Jesus is, through their earthly study. As the Lord taught Isaiah, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8–9). Nevertheless Jesus, as the Son of Man, came down from heaven to teach them.

What is it that Jesus wants Nicodemus and all Israel to understand about heaven? "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved" (John 3:14–17).<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, John's narrative does not include Nicodemus's immediate response to Jesus's teachings. Perhaps Nicodemus, like those who experienced day one of Jesus's ministry at the Bountiful temple (see 3 Nephi 17:2–3), needed time to ponder, pray, and receive the outpouring of the Spirit so as to comprehend what he had been

taught and recognize the implications for his life. Certainly in John 7 he was willing to stand up to his peers on Jesus's behalf, even though they ridiculed him for it (John 7:45–52). He also came with Joseph of Arimathea, bringing spices for Jesus's burial when they procured Jesus's body from Pilate (19:38–42). Both of these acts suggest that Nicodemus did indeed begin to understand the heavenly perspective of who Jesus really is. The dialogue with Nicodemus reminds all readers that only through being born from above is one able to fully comprehend how the crucified Jesus could bring eternal life to the inhabitants of this world and also provide evidence of God's great love for his people.

### **The Samaritan Woman at the Well (John 4:5–29)**

In the story of Nicodemus, his earthly qualities were highlighted, at least in part, by his designation as a “man of the Pharisees” and “a ruler of the Jews,” a communal leader who came to Jesus “by night.” In John's second extended dialogue, the qualities of his dialogue partner are “a mirror image” of Nicodemus.<sup>18</sup> This time Jesus engages a woman, a Samaritan, and does so in broad daylight (John 4:6). Unlike Nicodemus who came in search of Jesus, in this instance Jesus initiates the dialogue. As part of his journey between Judea and Galilee, Jesus stopped at Jacob's well in Sychar (4:3–5). The imperfect tense of the verb in verse 6 “was sitting” (Greek, *kathzomai*) indicates that he was specifically waiting for the woman to come and draw water<sup>19</sup> so that he could ask her for a drink.

Collecting water for drinking and household chores was a laborious part of a woman's daily responsibilities. In both Judea and Samaria, the people relied on wells and cisterns to collect water during the brief rainy season to ensure their survival during the hot, dry summers. When the Samaritan woman arrived at the well in the middle of the day, her mind was undoubtedly focused on the grind of her daily chore, which the narrative suggests she was anxious to eliminate (John 4:15).



Jesus's request for a drink seems to have startled the woman: "How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? for the Jews are not on friendly terms [Greek, *synchraomai*] with the Samaritans" (John 4:9).<sup>20</sup> Relations between Jews and Samaritans were at a low point during New Testament times.<sup>21</sup> Her questions highlight that at the beginning of this dialogue, from her earthly perspective, the woman saw Jesus simply as "a Jew," which in her mind would have been the equivalent of an enemy. The narrative uses two literary techniques to indicate that the woman acted as a spokesperson for the Samaritan people as Nicodemus was for the teachers of Israel. First, unlike Nicodemus, she remains nameless throughout the narrative, known only by her ethnic status as a "woman of Samaria." Second, by verse 12, the dialogue shifts from the single forms of speech into plural forms:<sup>22</sup> "Art thou greater than *our* father Jacob, which gave *us* the well, and drank thereof himself, and his children, and his cattle?" (emphasis added; see also John 4:20).

Jesus uses the dialogue to engage the woman and capture her attention by teaching of the living water that he promised to provide for her. Like Nicodemus before her, the Samaritan woman misunderstood the intent of Jesus's teachings, understanding them only from an earthly perspective: "Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep: from whence then hast thou that living water? Art thou greater than our father Jacob, which gave us the well, and drank thereof himself, and his children, and his cattle?" (John 4:11–12). Jesus's response further accentuated the woman's misunderstanding. "Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (4:13–14). Given the laborious chore of collecting the water each day, the woman's response is understandable, even if misguided. "Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw" (4:15).

Only after Jesus had gained her attention with the hope of living water did he move to help her raise her sights. To do so he had

to accomplish two things. First, he had to bring her to a point where she felt a sense of sin and therefore a need for help. Second, he had to establish his authority as God. He accomplished both of these as he shifted the dialogue away from living water and focused on her marital status. He simultaneously raised a mirror of spiritual introspection and opened the door for her to see him from a higher spiritual perspective. He revealed to her that even though they had just met, he knew who she was: more than the fact that she was a Samaritan, she was a woman who had had five husbands but was then living in an adulterous relationship (John 4:16–18).

The revelation clearly affected the woman. Later, she told the men in her village that Jesus “told me all things that ever I did” (John 4:29). In light of the details recorded in John, this statement appears to be a hyperbole, but it illustrates how profound the revelation of her life was to the woman. She now saw this man at the well in a different light. She knew that Jesus was much more than a Jew: “Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet” (4:19).

This was a significant realization for her. The Samaritans anticipated the coming of a prophet like unto Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15–18), which they identified as a *Tabeb*, or a revealer.<sup>23</sup> But with this realization, the woman was faced with an internal quandary. On the one hand, she recognized Jesus as a prophet; on the other, she was torn by the reality that “our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship” (John 4:20; emphasis added). Note how she again uses the plural form of speech to reinforce her status as spokesperson. The mountain that the Samaritans worshipped on was Mount Gerizim, located just to the south of Sychar, and would have been clearly visible to both Jesus and the woman. The Samaritans had built a temple there that had been destroyed by the Jewish leader John Hyrcanus in 109 BC. The past tense of the woman’s statement that her ancestors worshipped on Mount Gerizim reflects the historical reality of Hyrcanus’s actions. Even though the temple was never rebuilt, Samaritans continued to

worship and offer sacrifices there in New Testament times, a practice that has continued into the present day.

Jesus's response to the question of where to worship was again calculated to move the Samaritan woman's perspective to an even higher level: "Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye [plural] shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father" (John 4:21). Here Jesus acknowledged the woman's status as spokesperson by also using the plural form of speech. The physical temple on Mount Gerizim had been destroyed. The physical temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed within a few years. But the purpose of temples had always been to provide a way for individuals to enter the presence of God. The Samaritan woman was so concerned about the Jewish-Samaritan debate over the correct location for the temple that she had not recognized that she was then standing in the presence of God: he was the Word, who was God. At this point, the woman did not know what she worshipped (4:22). Salvation was "of the Jews" because the prophet standing before her was the source of salvation and because he, as she had quickly recognized at the beginning of their interaction, was a Jew.

Jesus taught her that the elements of "true worship" are not always a function of location or of having a physical building in which to worship. Just as Jesus taught Nicodemus the importance of the Spirit in helping earthly people to understand spiritual things, so Jesus taught the Samaritan woman that those who worship him "must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Again, with this added teaching the woman was confused. As we have noted, the Samaritans anticipated the coming of a *Tahab*, to whom she is probably referring when she declared, "I know that Messiah cometh, which is called Christ: when he is come, he will tell us all things" (4:25). The Samaritans did not anticipate a messianic Davidic king. Having used the dialogue to create a teaching moment, Jesus was then ready to reveal fully his identity to the Samaritan woman. He was the fulfillment of this Samaritan hope; he was the prophet "like unto [Moses]" (compare 3 Nephi 20:23). But, in making that identification, he went

further. He applied the divine title to himself. Literally, he says, “The one who speaks to you [is] I Am [Greek, *egō eimi*]” (4:26; author’s translation; compare John 8:58; Exodus 3:11–14). Jesus was indeed the prophet like unto Moses, but he was also the God who directed Moses. In both of these roles, he had indeed come to tell her “all things” (John 4:25).

In this instance, unlike the Nicodemus narrative, we are not left to wonder about how the Samaritan woman responded to her dialogue with Jesus. John tells us that she “then left her waterpot” (John 4:28). At the beginning of the narrative she had come to the well with her waterpot in search of water, and she did indeed leave with water, but it was not the kind that she could carry in a pot. She had found the living water that Jesus had promised her. She then returned to Sychar and invited the villagers to “Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?” (4:29).

In this dialogue Jesus helped the nameless woman of Samaria come to know that he was not just a Jew. He was the promised prophet, like unto Moses, who would speak the words of God; he was the Messiah; and he was the I Am. As such he was willing to cross social, religious, and political boundaries to seek out even those who lived in the periphery of society.

## **Jesus and the Man Born Blind (John 9:1–38)**

Jesus’s dialogue with the man born blind has points of both continuity and discontinuity with those of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman at the well. With both Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman the dialogue was with *only* Jesus, but in this example of the man born blind, his interactions with Jesus act as bookends for a narrative that is interrupted by an ongoing dialogue, first with the man’s neighbors and then with the Pharisees, both of whom question him extensively about how he received his sight. Even with this difference, however, there is also a continuation of themes that are important for John’s Gospel as a whole and are also found in Nicodemus’s experience.

The theme of darkness that we saw in the Nicodemus narrative returns. This man had been blind since birth, so the only thing that he had ever known was darkness. Unlike Nicodemus, however, the darkness is not a choice but something that happened “that the works of God should be made manifest in him” (John 9:3). His visual limitation was not only a physical reality but a symbol for his spiritual blindness. While receiving his physical sight from Jesus is an important miracle—one of the seven “signs” in the first half of John’s Gospel<sup>24</sup>—the major focus in John’s narrative is the spiritual aspect of helping him to see and recognize the eternal nature of Jesus’s identity. His story reiterates that the process of coming to “see” Jesus is a progressive one.

Like the Samaritan woman, the blind man is also unnamed in the narrative, and his handicap means that he also exists in the marginal shadows of his religious and social community. He also functions as a representative of disciples. His story shows that even with an incomplete knowledge one can remain loyal to Jesus in his absence.

The narrative begins after Jesus had left the temple (John 8:59). When he and his disciples encountered the blind man, Jesus used the opportunity to reveal the works of God, and by so doing, he taught about his own mission. He declared to his disciples, “I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (9:4–5). At the beginning of this narrative, the dialogue is confined to Jesus and his disciples with the blind man lingering in the background, although it is probable that he could hear the interchange.

Jesus’s first direct interaction with the man was when he made clay by mixing his saliva with some of the dirt on the ground and then anointed the man’s eyes with it.<sup>25</sup> The first words that he speaks do not initiate a dialogue; he simply directs him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam, which he does.<sup>26</sup> One can only imagine the experience he must have had as he washed the clay from his eyes, opened them and, for the first time in his life, was able to see. The sensory overload

must have been overwhelming as he was able to connect the vibrant colors with the sounds of Jerusalem with which he was accustomed.

As he then left the pool, those neighbors who knew him recognized that a miracle had taken place and questioned whether he was the same person that they knew. When he affirmed his identity, they naturally asked, "How were thine eyes opened?" (John 9:10). I'm not sure that with everything he had experienced up to that point he had given much thought to answering this question. So he almost mechanically rehearsed the events, "A man that is called Jesus made clay, and anointed mine eyes, and said unto me, Go to the pool of Siloam, and wash: and I went and washed, and I received sight" (9:11). When they asked him where this Jesus was, he simply replied, "I know not" (9:12).

Because the event took place on the Sabbath day, the Pharisees were very interested in what had transpired. They also wanted to know how the man had received his sight. His response to them was just a shortened version of what he had told his neighbors, "He put clay upon mine eyes, and I washed, and do see" (John 9:15). This answer divided the Pharisees. Some of them said, "This man is not of God, because he keepeth not the sabbath." But others asked, "How can a man that is a sinner do such miracles?" (9:16). So they again questioned him about Jesus. But by now the repeated questioning seems to have forced the man to consider more deeply the events of the day. Who was this Jesus who had enabled him to see? Initially he had simply considered him to be some man. But was he? In all his years of blindness many "men" must have passed by without performing such a miracle. Surely this Jesus must be more than a man, and so, like the Samaritan woman, he answered, "He is a prophet" (9:17).

The Pharisees clearly did not like that answer. At this point, they were not convinced that the man they were in conversation with had ever been blind. So they questioned his parents, who confirmed the fact but who, fearing possible retribution, refused to be drawn into the debate about how the miracle had occurred. So the Pharisees tried again, refocusing their inquisition on the miracle recipient. More

and more they were convinced that Jesus must have been a sinner because, in their minds, he had broken the Sabbath day. They therefore confronted the man again: "Give God the praise," they declared, "we know that this man is a sinner." But his response was simply, "Whether he be a sinner or no, I know not: one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see" (John 9:24–25). So they continued to push him, "What did he do to thee? how opened he thine eyes?" (9:26). It seems to me as I read this account that by this point the man was getting frustrated by the barrage of questions. Let me paraphrase his response: "I have repeatedly answered your questions, but you're not listening to me! If I give you the same answer again, is it going to make any difference? Will you then become one of Jesus's disciples?" (9:27). Again, that was certainly not what they wanted to hear.

As annoying as all these questions must have been, they served a purpose because they apparently caused the man to move beyond the sensory overload that the miracle must have stimulated and forced him to reflect more deeply on what had happened to him. Their unrelenting questioning had, I think, triggered an unintended consequence. Not only had the man now acknowledged that Jesus was a prophet, their questioning had enabled him to recognize that Jesus could not be the sinner that the Pharisees had categorized him as. He was beginning to raise his sights and see differently from the other "earthly" people who peppered him with questions. He was now using the light that only Jesus could provide to illuminate his path, and so he said, "Why herein is a marvellous thing, that ye know not from whence he is, and yet he hath opened mine eyes. Now we know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper [Greek, *theosebēs*] of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth. Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind? If this man were not of God, he could do nothing" (John 9:30–33). This increasing spiritual sight that he was gaining resulted in the Pharisees casting him out (John 9:34), but it also opened a door.

When Jesus heard that the man had been cast out, he sought him out for the second time and now engaged him in a dialogue, albeit

a brief one. “Dost thou believe on the Son of God?”<sup>27</sup> (John 9:35). Remember that this man had never seen Jesus, and so he asked, “Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on him?” (9:36). In Greek the word translated here as “Lord” is *kyrios*. It is often used to identify someone who is the master of a house or the owner of a vineyard. In this sense it is a title of respect. “And Jesus said unto him, Thou hast both seen him, and it is he that talketh with thee” (9:37). Now the man understood with whom he was talking, and he again addressed him as Lord, but this time he used it in a different context. *Kyrios* is also used as a title for deity. It is frequently used to translate YHWH, or Jehovah, in the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible. This now seems to be the sense in which he then used it when he said, “Lord, I believe” because he then worshipped Jesus (9:38). Here the Greek word for worship is *proskyneō*, which means that he fell down and prostrated himself before Jesus. It is a form of worship reserved for kings and gods. It is the same word used to describe what the wise men did when they found the child Jesus (Matthew 2:11) and what the disciples did when Jesus and Peter returned to the boat after Peter’s attempt to walk on the water. “Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God” (Matthew 14:33). The man’s act of *proskyneō* is evidence that he now recognized who Jesus really was: he was not of this world; he was “from above” and was God.

His ability to recognize Jesus from this christological perspective was now in stark contrast to the Pharisees. They had always had their physical sight, but they lacked the spiritual sight that this man had now gained. For them Jesus was a sinner. If they did not see him as a prophet, they certainly did not see him as God. Jesus said to them, “For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind.” The Pharisees recognized that this statement was a direct condemnation of them. “And some of the Pharisees which were with him heard these words, and said unto him, Are we blind also? Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth” (John 9:39–41).



The miracle that John wants his readers to understand in this story is not limited to the man receiving his physical sight, as impressive as that miracle was. The Pharisees had always had their physical sight, yet they could not “see” who Jesus was. The real miracle was that the man received his spiritual sight, which enabled him to break free from his earthly shackles and “see” who Jesus really was: not just a man, or even a prophet, but his God.

### **Knowing the One “Come from Above”**

In all three of these dialogues Jesus reached out to individuals who in their own way were stymied by their environmental limitations of being “of the earth.” As a result, they struggled to understand that Jesus was not just another man or miracle worker or even a prophet. He was, and is, all of those things, but he was also far more. As the one “come from above,” he was and is God who came to earth to help each of us realize that there is so much more to life—eternal life—than just our mortal reality. Each of his dialogue partners was, to some extent, in darkness. For both Nicodemus and the blind man, that darkness was both physical and spiritual; for the Samaritan woman, it was the latter. Nicodemus chose the darkness, but for the blind man it was out of his control. The message of John’s Gospel is that as the creator God, Jesus brings both physical and spiritual light to the world and its inhabitants.

That fact is as true today as it was in the first century. Jesus wants to engage all of us in dialogues so that he can personally bring his light to illuminate both our minds and the spiritual path that lays ahead of us. It does not matter to him whether we are a person of stature in the community or someone who is marginalized by his or her community. He wants each of us, wherever we are in our personal journeys, to understand more fully who he is eternally and why that matters for us. Sometimes Jesus, as in the instance of Nicodemus, waits for us to approach him and initiate the dialogue. Sometimes, as was the case with both the Samaritan woman and the blind man,

he will be the one to seek us out and initiate the dialogue. Sometimes, as with the blind man, he will allow other dialogues to help us recognize the great things he has done for us so that we are better prepared to be taught when he does seek us out. On some occasions, during these dialogues we will need time to absorb the magnitude of what Jesus is trying to teach us and the implications for our personal lives. For all of us the learning curve will be incremental, as it was for the Samaritan woman and the blind man. Whatever our individual case may be, the important question that we all must consider is this: How will we respond to the dialogues that Jesus seeks to have with us? Will we allow him to stretch our minds, and perhaps take us out of our comfort zones, so that we can at least begin to see and understand heavenly things?

The dialogues are an important tool to help readers better understand the Gospel of John's premise that "in the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was God." They provide the forum for Jesus to give his own christological witness and help individuals in his day, along with modern readers, to believe that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing [we] might have life through his name" (John 20:31).

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## Notes

1. For a discussion, see Eric D. Huntsman, "Jesus on Jesus: John 5 and 7," in *Perspectives on Mormon Theology: Scriptural Theology*, ed. James E. Faulconer and Joseph M. Spencer (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 69–80.

2. Clement of Alexandria seems to be the first to call John's Gospel a "spiritual gospel" (as quoted by Eusebius, *History of the Church* 6.14.5).
3. In Johannine theology, coming from above is associated with coming from the Father, a theme that is repeated throughout the Gospel (see John 5:43–44; 8:42; 13:3; 16:27–30).
4. Philipp F. Bartholomä, *The Johannine Discourses and the Teaching of Jesus in the Synoptics: A Contribution to the Discussion concerning the Authenticity of Jesus's Words in the Fourth Gospel*, *Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter* 57 (Tübingen: Francke, 2012), 1.
5. Bartholomä, *Johannine Discourses*, 3–4.
6. Other examples of dialogues that function in similar ways to these three include the discourses on the bread of life (John 6), on slave and son (John 8:31–58), and during the washing of the feet (John 13).
7. Bartholomä, *Johannine Discourses*, 107.
8. Julette M. Bassler, "Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108, no. 4 (1989): 635–46.
9. Bassler, "Mixed Signals," 636–37.
10. J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 174–75.
11. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed., rev. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), s.v. καταλαμβάνω.
12. Likewise, John's Gospel records that "it was night" when Judas left to betray Jesus (John 13:30). In addition to providing a temporal marker, it also served as a commentary on Judas's actions. He was about to engage in the work initiated in the premortal world that attempted to overcome the light.
13. Laurence Cantwell, "The Quest for the Historical Nicodemus," *Religious Studies* 16, no. 4 (1980): 484.
14. "Discourse, 9 July 1843, as Reported by Willard Richards," p. [304], *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed March 28, 2018, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-9-july-1843-as-reported-by-willard-richards/5>.

15. Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 83.
16. Johannes Beutler, SJ, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. Michael Tait (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 95.
17. Scholars have debated where the dialogue with Nicodemus closes and where John's comments begin. Some argue that it closes with verse 12 because in verse 13 Jesus is spoken of in the third person. George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary 36 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 50. Still others view all of verses 13–21 “as the continuation of Jesus’s answer to Nicodemus’s last question in v. 9.” Beutler, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 91; see also Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 200. I favor the latter position.
18. Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 47.
19. Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 237.
20. I have chosen to translate *synchraomai* as “are not on friendly terms with” instead of the KJV’s “have no dealings with” because in verse 2 clearly the disciples are having dealings with the Samaritans as they go into the city to buy food.
21. In 109 BC the Jewish leader John Hyrcanus had destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 13.255). Josephus describes Samaritans as “apostates of the Jewish nation” (*Antiquities of the Jews* 11:340). See also Ben Sira 50:25–26: “Two nations I detest, and a third is no nation at all: the inhabitants of Mount Seir, the Philistines, and the senseless folk that live at Shechem” (RSV). This antipathy is supported in John’s Gospel when Jesus’s opponents seek to ostracize him by saying, “Say we not well that thou art a Samaritan, and hast a devil?” (John 8:48). However, while Jesus vigorously objects to the claim that he has a devil (John 8:49), he seems to have no problems with being called a Samaritan. In Luke’s Gospel, Samaritans are portrayed in a very positive light in the stories of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–35) and the ten lepers (Luke 17:11–19).
22. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, 47–48.

23. Samaritans believe that Eli's decision to move the ark from Shechem to Shilo initiated a transition from *Rḥwth*, the age of Divine Favor, to the *Fanūta*, the age of Divine Wrath. They believe that the *Fanūta* will continue until the coming of the *Taheb*, an eschatological prophet who will restore the *Rḥwth*. Secondary developments variously describe this prophet as being part of the eschatological scene, coming from the east, possessing the staff of Aaron and the manna, bringing the holy tabernacle, and revealing truth. Ferdinand Dexinger, "Rḥwth," in *A Companion to Samaritan Studies*, ed. Alan D. Crown, Reinhard Pummer, and Abraham Tal (Tübingen: Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1993), 202–4.
24. Scholars have long noted two major sections in John's Gospel with chapter 11 acting as a bridge between them: the Book of Signs (John 2–11) and the Book of Glory (John 11–17). The Book of Signs consists of seven miracles or signs (Greek, *sēmeiōn*): turning water into wine, which John describes as the "beginning of the miracles" (John 2:1–11; Greek, *archēn tōn sēmeiōn*); healing the nobleman's son, which "is again the second miracle that Jesus did" (John 4:46–54); healing the paralytic at Bethesda (John 5:1–18); feeding the five thousand (John 6:5–14); walking on the water (John 6:16–24); healing the man born blind (John 9:1–7); and raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1–46). These signs may have been based on a separate written source that John used when compiling his Gospel. For some discussions, see C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 287–389, especially 290; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I–XII; A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 29 (New York: Doubleday, 1966), cxxxix–cxliv. However, it is clear that Jesus performed more than seven signs, "And many other signs [Greek, *sēmeiōn*] truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples" (John 20:30). John H. Bernard has argued that it is pointless to try and identify the number of them. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), 1:lxviii–xc.
25. Jesus also used spittle in other healings (Mark 7:33; 8:23). Pliny the Elder discusses the therapeutic value of spittle in general, and a number of

- ancient sources record that Vespasian specifically cured a blind man by spitting in his eye (Tacitus, *History* 4.81; Suetonius, *Life of Vespasian* 7.2–3; Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 65.8). See Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, 207. The second-century Christian theologian Irenaeus understood Jesus's actions as an allusion to the creation of Adam in Genesis 2:7 (*Against Heresies* 5.15.2). See Daniel Frayer-Griggs, "Spittle, Clay, and Creation in John 9:6 and Some Dead Sea Scrolls," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132, no. 3 (2013): 659–70; Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 545–46.
26. The Roman pool of Siloam must be distinguished from the Byzantine one that was for centuries frequented by pilgrims, including Orson Hyde. *A Sketch of the Travels and Ministry of Elder Orson Hyde* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1869), 13. The pool was located about a third of a mile south of the Temple Mount. In 2004 the northeast corner of the pool was located and excavated so that it is visible today. See Ronny Reich, Eli Shukron, and Omri Lernau, "Recent Discoveries in the City of David, Jerusalem," *Israel Exploration Journal* 57, no. 2 (2007): 163–69.
27. Our earliest texts of John have the phrase "Son of Man" instead of "Son of God": P<sup>66</sup>, P<sup>75</sup>, 8, B, D, W. The title "Son of Man," in this context, comes from Daniel 7:13–14 and describes an eschatological figure who would come "with the clouds" and would be given dominion, glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages should serve him. This "dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed." It is a title that Jesus uses for himself and that, at times, he prefers over the title Messiah (Mark 8:27–31).