

PROV 30:1-6 AS THE MAIN IMPLIED REFERENCE IN JOHN 3:1-21

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Introduction

Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:1-21 is widely recognized as one of the summits of God's revelation in the New Testament,¹ and as foundational to all other discourses in the fourth gospel.² For all its spiritual luminosity, however, the passage exhibits an apparently uneven flow of thought, with abrupt transitions between topics. The successive interventions between Nicodemus and Jesus may be outlined as follows:

- N Your teaching must come from God, for it is obvious that God is with you (v. 2).
- J To enter the kingdom of God one must be born again/from above (v. 3).
- N Can anyone reenter the womb? (v. 4).
- J One must be born both from water and spirit (or: flesh and spirit, vv. 5,6). The development of the spirit-born person is as incomprehensible as the wind (vv. 7,8).
- N How can this be? (v. 9)
- J You are rejecting a testimony given strictly within the limits of personal knowledge (vv. 10-12) about events on earth. But the Man who "ascended to heaven and descended" can be no other than the Son of Man (v. 13), who must now "ascend" giving salvation to all those who trust in Him (vv. 14,15), since His previous "descent" was not for condemnatory judgment but for a salvific mission from the loving Father (vv. 16,17). Judgment is automatic as every single person chooses to accept Him or not (vv. 18-21).

¹For many Christians John 3:16 is the first, foremost, or even the only passage they commit to memory.

²Edwyn C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, ed. Francis Noel Davey (London: Faber & Faber, 1940), 203.

While this summary is not intended to do justice to the spiritual depth of the conversation, it truthfully reports on the sequence of topics. The connection between some of these thoughts is self-evident, but this is not true for all parts of the conversation. For example, how is the divine origin of Jesus' teaching, as recognized by Nicodemus, to be connected with the need for a new birth? How is the rejection of personal testimony by some Jewish leaders to be related to the true explanation about Him "who ascended and descended from heaven"?

These difficulties with the flow of thought in the passage disappear with the realization that there is an OT passage to which both Nicodemus and Jesus implicitly allude, and which weaves together the topics of their conversation. Prov 30:1-6 is not explicitly cited in this talk. However, since both men were considered rabbis (John 3:2,10), they were expected to recognize the implicit biblical allusions in each other's intervention, and extend them in their own, so as to produce a biblical repartee of the type enjoyed even today by many people deeply familiar with the biblical text.

It has long been understood that the words of Jesus in this conversation allude to Prov 30:3-5.³ These verses have been called the "seed-bed"⁴ of ideas expounded by Jesus at that time, especially "His central thoughts"⁵: the recognition of His name as God's eternal Son, the promise of eternal life for all those who put their trust in Him, the ascending and descending of the Son of Man, and even God's "heavenly activities with water and wind."⁶

However, the first verses of the unit (Prov 30:1,2) as well as the last (30:6),⁷ have been insufficiently recognized as integral to these allusions. This paper contends that, once the whole of Prov 30:1-6 is given its proper place, the flow of ideas in John 3:1-21 becomes fully comprehensible. Further, we will also learn how Jesus gave shape to His usual self-presentation as the Danielic "Son of Man" by means of other less apocalyptic parts of the Hebrew Bible. In this way we obtain additional insights into how He understood His mission on earth and revealed it to His disciples.

³For example, Prov 30:4 is given as a cross-reference for John 3:13 in K. Aland et al., ed. *The Greek New Testament*, 3d ed. (NY & London: United Bible Societies, 1983).

⁴W. Hall Harris III, "Exegetical Commentary on John 3," Trustworthy Bible Study Resources; accessed 21 Sept, 2004; available from <http://www.bible.org>; Internet.

⁵Zane C. Hodges, "Water and Spirit: John 3:5," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 (1978): 220.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Both the ancient Hebrew *petachah* system and the modern *Biblia Hebraica* paragraphing confirm these limits for the unit.

Possible Allusions

Allusions to Prov 30:1-6 in John 3:1-21 can be verified in any version. However, by reading the Hebrew consonantal text in a particular way, the relationship becomes clearer. In particular, some terms in 30:1 may be translated as part of the discourse of the text, instead of constituting personal names (“Ithiel” and an otherwise unknown “Ucal”) as in the modern versions that follow the medieval Masoretic punctuation.⁸ Ancient versions, such as the LXX and the Vulgate, did not find personal names here. This does not imply that such a reading of the Hebrew text is the “correct” one,⁹ only that it was possible for Nicodemus and/or Jesus to see the text in this way, which contributes to explain their conversation.

The consonantal Hebrew text below, together with an interlinear translation, are designed to highlight those possibilities that enhance an understanding of the passage:

- 30:1a *dbry* *ḡwr* *bn-yqh* *hms’*
 The words of Agur son of Jakeh, the oracle.
- 30:1b *n’ m* *hgbr* *l’ yty ḥ*
 The Man of God¹⁰ spoke on “God is with me”;¹¹
- 30:1c *l’ yty ḥ* *w ḥl*
 On “God is with me, so I am fully capable,¹²
- 30:2a *ky* *b’ r* *ḥky* *m’ yš*
 for I am the most unschooled of men,
- 30:2b *wl’* *bynt* *ḏm* *ly*
 and do not possess human sophistication,
- 30:3a *wl’* *lmdty* *ḥkmh*
 nor did I learn wisdom,

⁸An exception is ASV mg, which translates *yty ḥ*, not as “Ithiel,” but as “I have wearied myself, O God;” and *ḥl*, not as “Ukal,” but as “am consumed.”

⁹“The Hebrew of this verse is obscure” (RSV mg).

¹⁰A *gbr* is by itself a “strong man,” but the formula *n’ um haggeber* is used in contexts of revelation (Num 24:3,15; 2 Sam 23:1 ff.) and special relationship with God. See H. Kosmala, “*Gābhar*,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 2:378-79.

¹¹The preposition *l’* after verbs of speech denotes the topic of the speech (as the English *on*). The term *yty* can be pointed as *ity*, “with me,” which is also how it is to be understood as a component of the personal name “Ithiel.” See M. Newman, “Ithiel,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible (IDB)*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (NY: Abingdon, 1962), 2:772. “God” (*ḥ*) is here written separated from the preceding term.

¹²Pointing *ḥl* as *ukal*, which preserves the Masoretic pronunciation. For the sense “I am capable,” see Num 22:6 and Esth 8:6.

- 30:3b *wd í* *qdšym* *’d^c*
 yet,¹³ I have the knowledge of the Holy One.”¹⁴
- 30:4a *my* *lh* - *šmym* *wyrd*
 Who ascended into heaven and descended?
- 30:4b *my* *šp* - *rwh* *bhšnw*¹⁵
 Who gathered the spirit in his bosom?
- 30:4c *my* *srr* *mym* *bšmlh*
 Who has wrapped the waters in a cloth?
- 30:4d *my* *hšzyq*¹⁶ *bkl- p̄sy- r̄s*
 Who has dominion over all the ends of the earth?
- 30:4e *mh* - *šmw* *wmh-šm-bnw*
 What is His name, and what is the name of His Son,
- 30:4f *ky* *td^c*
 since you know it?
- 30:5a *kl- mrt* *lwh* *srwph*
 Every word of God is tested.¹⁷
- 30:5b *mgn* *hw’* *lšsym* *bw*
 He is a Protector¹⁸ for those who trust in Him.
- 30:6a *l̄ - twsp* *’l - dbryw*
 Do not add to His words,
- 30:6b *pn - ywkyh bk* *wnkzbt*
 lest He reprove you and you be proved a liar.

Read in this way, the allusions to Prov 30: 1b-3 in Nicodemus’ greeting (John 3:2) become plain. “This man came to Him by night,¹⁹ and said to Him: ‘Rabbi, we know that *you have come from God as a teacher* (Prov 30:3), for no one can do *these signs that You do* (30:1c,2), unless *God is with him*’ ” (30:1c,d).

Here Nicodemus recognizes that Jesus had the “knowledge of the Holy One” even though He did not have the benefit of rabbinical education (“the most unschooled of men” Prov 30:2a). Jesus is a “fully capable” (cf. Prov 30:1c) Man

¹³The conjunction *w^c* often has an adversative sense at the end of a series.

¹⁴There is no negative particle in this clause, as in the modern versions. “Knowledge of the Holy One” follows the NASB.

¹⁵This follows the Greek versions as suggested in the Stuttgartensia critical apparatus. The LXX represents a Palestinian form of the Hebrew text popular in the days of Jesus.

¹⁶This also follows the Greek versions.

¹⁷Henceforth, the NASB is followed, unless otherwise noted.

¹⁸This is vocalized as *megen*, the alternative being *magen* (shield). In any case it contains a reference to Gen 15:1-6.

¹⁹Rabbis who had secular occupations during the daytime met for theological study and debate at night.

of God, and the signs He performs argue powerfully that “God is with Him” (cf. Prov 30:1b).

This greeting shows that some elements in the religious establishment²⁰ of the late Second Temple era were able to accept the notion that Jesus was a man of God. They did not seem to realize, however, that a new era was dawning with Him. Therefore, Jesus, who obviously had no difficulty in recognizing the allusions to Prov 30:1-3 in this salutation, found in the next verse (30:4b,c) some ideas that might correct this deficiency. His statement, “Unless one is born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3), seems inspired in terms of Prov 30:4 which suggests sonship. In the Hebrew Bible, the term *hosen* (bosom) connotes the place where sons are gathered (Isa 49:22). Following this clue, the “spirit” which is “gathered” in the bosom of a heavenly Being (Prov 3:4a,b) suggests a spiritual sonship “from above.”

Many commentators believe that being “born from water” (John 3:5) refers to natural birth, that is, being born “from the flesh” (3:6).²¹ They hold this position because of the “bag of waters” (amniotic sac) in which the fetus develops inside the uterus, the rupture of which announces an imminent birth.²² Others ardently dispute this, seeing in “water” a reference to baptism or, with more claim to probability, to the waters upon which the *ru^h* (wind/spirit) of God hovered at creation (Gen 1:2) This understanding makes the birth “from water” synonymous with the birth “from above.”

This *crux interpretum* will probably remain even after taking the passage of Proverbs into consideration,²³ since the “waters wrapped into a cloth” (Prov 30:4c) may seem to favor both interpretations, either as a literal description of the fluid enveloped in the amniotic membrane or as a poetic description of the “gathering of the waters in one place” at creation (Gen 1:9). While the former has the advantage of literalness, the latter is more natural in the context of Prov 30 when this passage is seen independently from its echo in John 3.

²⁰Nicodemus, “ruler of the Jews” (John 3:1) was a Pharisee (7:50) and a rich man (19:39). This name was probably for Gentile consumption only (Grk., conquering people). In more intimate circles he would have been known as “Rabbi Israel,” a people’s name that means “prevailing upon God,” according to Gen 32:28. A possible pun (“teacher of Israel,” that is, Rabbi Israel) may be found in 3:10.

²¹Cf. Hodges, 211-13.

²²This cannot be considered too “scientific” or “clinical” to be a valid interpretation, as Hodges, 212, claims. As a matter of fact, primitive peoples, and those of antiquity, were much more familiar with the phenomenon than modern urban populations, who tend to consign this matter to health care specialists.

²³One of the main objections leveled against the “birth from water = birth from the flesh” position, is that which stipulates that biological birth is a condition for entering the kingdom of heaven. Hodges says that it is unnecessary or “jejune” (ibid.). However, this objection disappears if Jesus is not bringing up the topic of water Himself, but merely interpreting successive parts of the OT passage.

What seems beyond dispute is that Nicodemus saw the amniotic bag of waters as an interpretive option, since he pointed to the difficulty of “enter[ing] a second time into his mother’s womb” (Grk. *koilia*, the uterus, 3:4). This statement is almost uniformly denounced today as unbelievably crass literalism on the part of Nicodemus. However, seen against the backdrop of Prov 30:4, it looks as if Nicodemus intended it to show he was on track, following the allusions to the Hebrew Bible which he initiated and Jesus continued.

Jesus’ statement on the mighty sway of wind (*pneuma*, spirit), which is able to “blow where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it” (John 3:8), seems inspired by Prov 30:4d, for this heavenly power “has dominion over all the ends [i.e., compass points] of the earth.” Nicodemus should “not marvel” that such a power is present in an unschooled man, because, just as in the case of wind, the development of this force cannot be perceived by humans or attributed to normal causes. Indeed, we do “not know where it comes from and where it is going” (3:8). Nicodemus, however, remained skeptical (3:9).

Jesus then continued His *peshet*²⁴ on Prov 30 at another verse. The incredulity of Nicodemus was inexcusable, since Jesus was, in fact, keeping to the letter of 30:6. He was not adding to God’s words or going beyond direct knowledge into speculative matters (John 3:11). So far He had only spoken about events in which He had been involved on earth (3:12), that is, the signs which had so impressed Nicodemus (3:2). But Prov 30:4a attributes this power to Somebody who “ascended into heaven and descended,” and 30:4e implies a reference to both God “and His Son.” This, says Jesus in 3:13, can only be taken as meaning the Son of Man.

This heavenly personage (Dan 7:13) had already been eschatologized by the pre-Christian Jewish reflection (Enoch, IV Ezra, and a large part of the early Rabbinical literature), following the clues in Dan 7:14,22,27, as the Judge who will appear at the end of time “sitting on the throne of His glory” (Enoch 62:2-5).²⁵ While Jesus applied this phrase to Himself (Matt 25:31), He introduced important nuances in this concept, as will be presently shown.

The Son of God will indeed resurrect the righteous and (separately) the unrighteous at the end of time (John 5:25-32), when He is to “execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man” (5:27). However, in our passage Jesus seems to point out that the “Son of Man who is in heaven” (3:13)²⁶ in the Danielic vision, is described in Prov 30:4, not as first descending from heaven and then ascending, but on the contrary, as first ascending and then descending. While the latter descent is undoubtedly eschatological, the Son of Man who was now on earth having

²⁴This is a contemporary application of a biblical passage, a practice that was typical of the Second Temple period.

²⁵S. E. Johnson, “Son of Man,” *IDB* (1962), 4:413-20.

²⁶RSV mg, following the “majority text” (Byzantine manuscripts).

“descended from heaven” (3:13), had yet to ascend there. Hence, Jesus was next expected to be “lifted up” (3:14) before His descent for final judgment.

This implies that the present mission of the Son of Man on earth was not one of condemnatory judgment, but of salvation, providing eternal life (3:15,16) for everyone who believes in Him, for “He is a Protector for those who trust in Him” (Prov 30:5b). The thought is repeated and reinforced in John 3:17-19. There is a sort of judgment going on since the descent of the heavenly Son of Man to earth, but this is largely automatic, as people choose to “name” Jesus as “[God’s] Son” (Prov 30:4e) or not, that is, to believe or disbelieve in Him (John 3:18,19). However, this is not yet the judgment in which He will sit “upon the throne of His glory,” but a judgment preceding His “lifting up,” after which all people are drawn to Him (John 12:31,32).

Conclusion

The foregoing comments are not meant as a full exposition of this exceedingly rich conversation, but merely attempts to elucidate the relationship between Prov 3:1-6 and John 3:1-21. Such analysis tends to show that the passage alluded to by Nicodemus provided Jesus with an opportunity to show from Scripture the essential core of His mission on earth. It also enabled Him to preclude conceptualizing this mission as an “over-realized eschatology” in which the Son of Man was to execute the final judgment without further delay.

This analysis also tends to give more cohesion to the different parts of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus as an extended exposition of a biblical passage obliquely alluded to by both teachers. Seen in this way, the conversation is an excellent example of how Jesus was able to “explain . . . the things concerning Himself in *all* the Scriptures” (Luke 23:27), including, somewhat unexpectedly, the book of Proverbs.