



Discipleship in John: Four Profiles

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THE GOSPEL OF JOHN PRESENTS THE MINISTRY OF JESUS IN TWO SEGMENTS. FIRST, there is the “public” Jesus who interacts with the world, performs “signs,” and makes speeches to crowds and various individuals about who he is. This is the Jesus of the first 12 chapters. Second, there is the “private” Jesus who gives his final address to an exclusive group the night before he dies. His death and resurrection “interrupt” the scene, but the speech before a similar audience resumes afterwards. The last eight chapters of the gospel cover this material.¹ Scholars often find the clue for this two-part schema in the introduction to the gospel, often called the prologue. There it is stated, “He came unto his own, and his own people did not accept him [referring to chapters 1-12]. But to all who accepted him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God [referring to chapters 13-21]” (John 1:11-12).²

Another way of saying this is that the first part of John deals with those who are potential disciples; the second part, with those who are actual disciples. If John

¹John 21 is often thought to be the conclusion to the gospel, with its own literary history. Even so, the focus is on the “private” Jesus who instructs those disciples who have decided to follow him closely.

²All translations are my own.

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Reviewing Jesus' encounter with four potential disciples in John's Gospel can help us understand our own discipleship—potential and real.

1:11-12 lists the table of contents for this book on discipleship, then John 12—the halfway point—also records a summary of how effective the public Jesus was. “Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe him” (12:37). In general, the signs and the speeches did not win the masses, the crowds. John 12 also stresses that Jesus did not expect that his work would be popular among the people (12:38-43). Rather, the focus of his ministry was on individuals who in some way responded. “The *one* who believes in me believes not in me but in the one who sent me. The *one* who sees me sees him who sent me” (12:44-45, emphasis mine). In this respect, progress was made, and the first 12 chapters show points of light. The message of Jesus fell on deaf corporate ears; but here and there were individuals who did respond and believe Jesus.

The purpose of this essay is to look at a few of those individuals profiled in John 1-12. We might call them potential disciples. Some of these figures enter and exit the scene quickly and almost anonymously. But there are others whom the gospel describes in surprising detail. John’s concern for their personality and development comes close to the modern reader’s interest in psychological and internal characterization. His clear literary intention is for readers to find a little of themselves in the individuals profiled.

The first persons Jesus meets (after John the Baptist) and summons are those who turn out to be numbered among the closest disciples, perhaps to be thought of as the twelve.³ All of those named in John 1 (Simon, Philip, Andrew, and Nathaniel) appear in later gospel passages, and the two unnamed persons may be the “sons of Zebedee” also mentioned later. The point is that they have chosen Jesus from the outset and will remain until the end. They stand for the type of disciple who has irrevocably cast his lot with the Master. They are the ones present for the last words of Jesus delivered in chapters 13-21. I will not focus on these few, because John does not, for the most part. Except for Peter, Thomas, and the “Beloved Disciple,” they are as faceless as the chorus around the hero of a Greek tragedy.

This assumption of resolute discipleship does not hold true for the next batch of individuals the gospel presents. Among these people are John’s most well-known and loved characters: Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well, the paralytic at the spring, the man born blind. These persons appeal to us because they have color and depth, questions and problems. They are like the rest of us who do not jump into discipleship without a lot of wavering and caution. Jesus encounters these people individually and addresses each one personally. They respond honestly and realistically. Not all of them end up “on board.” These four constitute a short list of characters that could also have included the mother of Jesus, Lazarus’ sister Mary, the official with the sick boy, and others. Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the paralytic, and the blind man suffice to give a survey of the varied responses to the call of discipleship.

³The “twelve” are only mentioned twice and never enumerated by name. Apparently the gospel assumes the readers’ familiarity with them, and they do not play a role in the gospel’s purposes in the first 12 chapters.

I. NICODEMUS

First is Nicodemus. To his credit, he seeks Jesus out, though he comes surreptitiously in the dead of the night. Nicodemus is a “leader of the Jews” (3:1), “a teacher of Israel” (3:10), and a member of the religious party most opposed to the teaching of Jesus. In fact, in chapter 12, the summary statement says that it was Nicodemus’ own group, the Pharisees, that intimidated the authorities who wanted to confess Jesus. Nicodemus politely addresses Jesus as a rabbi in God’s service (3:2). With his perfunctory greeting, he is like one who tries to fill up a canyon with reverberating echoes: the noise has no substance. For a gospel that announces a new Genesis founded upon Christ (“In the beginning was the Word...”), merely calling Jesus a good rabbi is woefully inadequate.

Hence, Jesus does not even acknowledge what Nicodemus has said. Instead he chooses to engage him in a seemingly unrelated topic of conversation. Jesus says that rebirth is necessary to enter the realm of God (3:3). Of course, Nicodemus the Pharisee has already found religion, so he thinks that Jesus must be referring to physical rebirth (3:4). No, Jesus responds, someone who is reborn spiritually knows the experience as surely as one who has been refreshed by an invisible breeze (3:5-8). How can a respected rabbi among the Jews not know this (3:10)?

And that is precisely the point. Nicodemus is the first of what we might loosely call the official clergy with whom Jesus has personal engagement. Yet Nicodemus does not accept the testimony of Jesus (3:11). Commendable is Nicodemus’ seeking out Jesus, but lamentable his response. For the rest of the conversation, it is Jesus who speaks while Nicodemus just fades away into the darkness from which he came. We are left with the feeling that he just doesn’t get it.

The fate of Nicodemus is not necessarily unhappy, however. In chapter 7, the gospel portrays Nicodemus as a defender of Jesus’ right to a fair trial (7:50-51); in chapter 19, Nicodemus helps to bury Jesus with honor. Is this a hint that Nicodemus has taken Jesus’ words to heart? Perhaps his nocturnal discussion with Jesus was the last hour before the dawn of hope.

II. THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

The next scene involving Jesus features a very different person than the respected teacher Nicodemus: the Samaritan woman at the well, who would have been an embarrassment and an anathema to pious Jews. Most likely the gospel juxtaposes these two, the woman and Nicodemus, for this very reason. The religious one rejects the revelation, but the renegade receives it. The Samaritans and the Jews were so opposed to each other that violent quarrels erupted which were quelled only by Roman legions.⁴

Like Nicodemus she meets with Jesus in isolation. Nicodemus comes in the dead of night, and the woman comes in the heat of the day—perhaps to avoid social contact with others (4:6). After all, her experiences with five husbands probably generated no small amount of gossip in a small village!

⁴See Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.6.1-3, §118-136; *Jewish Wars* 2.12.3-5, §232-246.

Jesus asks for water. The request goes against the social and religious norms (4:9-10). What is more, the woman reasons, Jesus does not even have a drinking cup (4:11). No, she cannot give what is asked. That is, again, exactly Jesus' point: she cannot give what she does not have. Her awareness of her own inadequacies and of his sufficiency grows as the conversation continues. First, she uses polite protocol, calling him, "sir" (4:11). The second "sir" (4:15) suggests that Jesus has more status in her eyes. Perhaps "lord" would be a better translation to show her increasing respect. Then, she begins to call him "prophet" (4:19), a religious title. For the Samaritan religion the word "prophet" was significant, since Samaritans believed that a type of Moses would arise to deliver them in the last days. Nevertheless, she also uses the term "Messiah" or Christ to describe the kind of knowledge Jesus is showing (4:25). Finally, Jesus discloses his own identity to her, using the highest title found in the gospel, "I am" (4:26).

What the reader glimpses in this private encounter is a lesson in christology. The woman has gone from complete ignorance about Jesus to an awareness that takes hold of her in an immediate way. She has journeyed from deficit to discipleship. She now goes far beyond what Nicodemus accepted in the previous chapter. She leaves her old way of life behind, symbolized by her water bucket left at the well, and rushes back to her city to give her testimony to Jesus (4:39). The reader sees in this woman of Samaria a depth of response that obviously surpasses that of Nicodemus. The reader learns at the end of the story (4:39) that the woman's message about Jesus opened the way for the positive response of the whole village.

III. THE PARALYTIC

After two days in Samaria, Jesus moves on into Jerusalem. There at the gate to the city he meets another potential disciple—one of the many sick and forlorn who lay around a spring that supposedly could cure them. In the ancient world springs and groves were commonly associated with divine miracles. There were no hospitals, and doctors were often little more than magicians possessing charms and snake oils.⁵ Medical cures were little more than trying to conjure up divine intervention. So it was that Bethzatha Spring attracted a crowd of the destitute, one of whom Jesus singles out. He was in particularly bad shape. For 38 years he has been paralyzed, and even now, so close to the water, he has been unable to immerse himself when the time of healing was thought to occur.

Jesus asks him a simple question: "Do you want to be healed?" (5:6). What a question! the man must think. He does not know with whom he is speaking and takes the question as an innuendo concerning his inability to get into the water. Rather than directly answering the question, he makes excuses for himself (5:7).

⁵Pliny the Elder (*Natural History*, book 28) surveys the medical treatments for human maladies in his day (ca. 50 C.E.). Among the "medicines" he recommends are the ashes of charred wolf's skull, the horns of a stag, heads of mice, eyes of crabs, owls' brains, salt of vipers, frogs' livers, locusts, bats, and elephant lice. He even prescribes the gall of wild boars, horse's foam, woman's milk, the application of serpents' skins, the urine of calves that were unweaned, bears' grease, the extract of decocted buckshorn, and similar nostrums.

Jesus then dramatically clarifies himself by healing the man on the spot. But note how reticent the passage is about the man's response. Sometimes the silence of the biblical narrative speaks as loudly as the dialogue. Apparently the man does not bother to engage Jesus in further conversation, for later he says he does not even know his benefactor's name (5:13)! When Jesus comes again to the obtuse man to give advice regarding the healing, does the man ask why Jesus chose him or how he should live his life in response or who Jesus is? No. Again the silence of the passage suggests that the healed man does not take any steps to grow in his knowledge of Jesus. Indeed, the only thing he really learns about Jesus is his name, which he promptly reports to the Jews. Even Nicodemus knew as much as to call Jesus a rabbi and a teacher who comes from God (3:2). And unlike Nicodemus, this paralytic is never heard of again in the gospel. It is safe to assume that he is among those who did not seek out a life of discipleship. His potential was recognized by Jesus but was not realized because of his muted response.

IV. THE MAN BORN BLIND

Now skip ahead several chapters and consider the parallel healing of chapter 9. This story in many ways balances chapter 5. Here, too, we find a man severely afflicted, blind from birth. However, in this case, Jesus seems more concerned to display the man as a symbol of his ministry (9:3-5) than to call the man to be one of his disciples. Rather than deal directly with the blindness, he sends the man to wash in a nearby spring (9:7). Once he is healed, the man seems to be as little informed as the earlier paralytic. Jesus has disappeared from the scene, and the man does not know where he is (9:12). However, this man proves to be a tenacious scrapper, clinging to every bit of truth he can muster about Jesus. For one thing, he knows Jesus' name (9:11). For another, he stands up to the threats of the authorities and testifies unflinchingly to the truth. His courage is in deliberate contrast to his wary parents' lack of it (9:20-23).

There are two interrogations of the man. By the time the second one occurs (9:24-34), the man shows that he has been reflecting and resolving some things about Jesus. He knows that Jesus has been making disciples, and that those disciples are at odds with the ruling authorities. He knows that Jesus has performed the miracle through the power of God. He knows that his healing is an unparalleled event that demonstrates the divine origins of Jesus. The man's theology so threatens the status quo that the authorities drive him out of their midst. In effect, the man is excommunicated. In his blindness he at least had the comfort of fellowship, but in his sight he is forced to take a position of isolation. All of this has occurred without any communication with Jesus beyond the initial command to wash his eyes. The man has simply used his head and has come to some politically incorrect conclusions.

It is now that Jesus takes concern for the man as a potential disciple. No longer just a token of divine revelation meant to inspire the observing crowd, he is now a man who has started "seeing" the heavenly things his partner in chapter 5

missed. Jesus goes in search of him just as he sought out the Samaritan woman and the paralytic.

“Do you believe in the Son of Man?” (9:35). The man answers with a question: “And who is he, sir, so that I may believe in him?” (9:36). Again the word “sir” can be translated “lord.” Even if the man is not addressing Jesus as Lord, at the very least he is yielding to Jesus as the one who can tell him heavenly things.

The Son of Man title is especially significant in the gospel of John. It is Jesus’ own way of referring to himself. No one calls him Son of Man in the gospel. Only Jesus so identifies himself.

Why this title? In the Old Testament canon, in one of the last books written, the image of Son of Man is found. In the book of Daniel (7:1-14), the “Ancient of Days” (God) is seated apart from every other heavenly creature, and no one except “one like a son of man” can approach him. To this “son of man” figure is given all authority. Though the Bible describes many prophets and teachers who have come down from God and a select few (Enoch and Elijah) who have come up to God, the unique claim of Jesus is that he is the Son of Man who has both come down and up (cf. John 3:13). The divine origin and divine destiny of the Son of Man are thus a central claim to divine status in this gospel. When Jesus so identifies himself to the man born blind, he is making a major disclosure to this would-be disciple. By such revelation, Jesus is inviting the man to become his disciple.⁶

“You have seen him, and the one speaking to you is he” (9:37). Now the healed man addresses Jesus as “Lord,” and this surely is the right translation. “‘I believe.’ And he worshiped him.” Thus, the man born blind is now a disciple with sight. He who was cast out of fellowship with the Jews is now in proximity to the Son of Man. Of the four examples of potential disciples, this man has come perhaps the farthest.

These are the men and women who personally met Jesus. They are profiles of the varying responses that were elicited by encounters with the Lord. To summarize briefly: Nicodemus kept seeking, the Samaritan woman became a missionary, the paralytic was never heard of again, the man born blind provoked his own ostracism in order to associate with Jesus. Among these individual accounts we may find some evidence of our own histories. We come to understand ourselves and our own responses to the message of the gospel. And is this not the very reason the stories are written, that we “may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and through believing...[we] may have life in his name” (20:31)? ⊕

⁶In the Gospel of John Jesus never calls himself “Messiah” or “Christ,” except in the “priestly” prayer (17:3). He directly refers to himself as “Son of God” only one time (11:4). These titles are not incorrect, but they apparently fall short of the divine revelation Jesus personifies. He allows others to call him what they like, but his own designation in the first 12 chapters is almost always Son or Son of Man. Twelve times he calls himself Son of Man in the first half of the gospel and only once in the second half (13:31-32). Often implicit in the title is the whole scope of Jesus’ earthly ministry and heavenly authority. Encountering the Son of Man in history cannot be divorced from encountering his exalted position before God. It is no wonder that Jesus would draw disciples to himself by claiming the title Son of Man in his public dialogues (3:13-14; 8:28; 12:23, 32-34).