

# A Novelist Looks at John 3:16

## by Davis Bunn

High Drama. At its simplest, this is a story which carries a universal theme. What is important for us to understand is how this theme need not be fully revealed until the very last moment. In such cases, the story's moral becomes a component of the drama itself, a pillar by which the mystery is maintained. We see the answer coming, we are confident it is there, even when we are not certain what the secret might be.

For such dramas to succeed, the author must reveal enough fragments along the way that, when the mystery is made clear, the audience can look back and see a logical development. In other words, the evidence must be hidden in plain sight.

The first three chapters of John's Gospel contain such a high drama, one with eternal consequences.

John has a specific reason behind the formative structure of these initial passages. John ignores the desert experience and much else that is contained in the more linear Gospels, and does so for a divine purpose. Every God-breathed word is intent upon sharing the message of eternal salvation. As a part of this, John sows the seeds which grow into John 3:16 in the Gospel's very first breath.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was eternal life.

The high drama begins with the mystic call of the unknowable. It is an astonishing declaration. John sees beyond the veil, and he shouts of this wonder across two thousand years.

And there in the passage's final verse we find a softly triumphant refrain, a plainsong of glory: Those who believe are born not of flesh, but of God. The two themes that will

be illuminated by the following sequences have now been established. God's eternal presence, and man's endless need.

What follows are a series of unique mini-dramas, each containing a singularity – that is, a distinctive flavor all their own.

To be effective, such mini-dramas must link logically. They must follow a clear path towards the story's climax. By so doing, their combined impact heightens the story's overall effect.

First, Jesus is affirmed and anointed at the River Jordan. John the Baptist, ordained by Isaiah, declares across the ages that here stands the One through whom the Spirit will breathe upon the world.

Next, John releases two of his own to become disciples of Jesus. They in turn draw in Simon Peter. And these are soon joined by Philip and Nathaniel.

To these new followers, Jesus makes the same invitation he does to us today: Come and see. What you do not understand will be made clear. The wonders of heaven await.

As in confirmation, these disciples join Jesus and his family at a wedding. And here the wonder of transformation is revealed.

Water into wine, old life into new. The best awaits all who are open to the miracle of rebirth.

Following this, with brutal abruptness, everything changes.

Good drama often feeds upon chaos. It is one of the oddest factors in shaping stories with lasting force.

When it comes to our own lives, most of us crave nothing more than order. And yet we revel in stories that reach beyond safe borders, and enter anarchic realms.

At this point, Jesus enters the Temple compound. This day

is the most profoundly important moment of the Hebrew calendar. If there were any point where a pronouncement could be assured to strike at the core of Judean society, it was here, and it was now.

Judeans from throughout the Roman empire and beyond have made literally the journey of a lifetime. They were commanded to present themselves at the Temple at least once, in order to make sacrifices upon a High Holy day. Special significance was given to performing the ritual now. Today. On the Passover Sabbath.

The stone-walled Temple enclave, several hundred meters in diameter, is packed.

The din is as fierce as the crowds, as the heat.

In the midst of this chaotic tumult, Jesus fashions a coil of whips. He then proceeds to drive out all before him—the animals, the traders, the bankers, the commerce, the frenzied normalcy of that amazing day.

What is subtly hidden in John's account is the *response*. This is a crucial element to all high drama. Whatever action occurs on stage must also reveal the repercussions. And this raises two questions.

First, how did the disciples react?

To answer this, we must examine the scene that comes immediately before. For here we find the reason why John links the wedding to the Temple frenzy.

The disciples have entered into the Passover celebrations in a state of awestruck wonder. They follow Jesus into that most crucial moment at the center of their earthly realm. They are filled with the hope that the Messiah indeed walks with them. And at their most vulnerable point, they face bedlam.

Herein is represented the two sides of our own walk with Jesus, the two faces of our faith. We are offered eternal

calm and celebration and wonder, yet disorder and turmoil is always close at hand.

The Temple confrontation reveals Jesus' conflict with the world.

Those whom Jesus loved before they rose from their place of repose beneath the tree, before they cleaved to him, before they were born, they too must accept this threat. They must bow to this requirement.

When the Lord died and rose again, the disciples remembered these events, and they understood, and they believed.

The second question that must be answered follows upon the first: Why did the Sanhedrin not cut him down?

The Temple compound is cleared. The shocked remnants of the crowd survey the demolished cages, the overturned tables, the glittering coins, the outraged merchants.

A voice rises above the others and calls out to Jesus, 'What sign can you show us to prove your authority?'

Like all good dialogue, this passage is both terse and multi-layered. This Judean has the power to speak for all. What is more, his words suggest that the speaker *knows* they do wrong. And yet he excuses it until someone has the audacity to demolish the status quo.

This spokesman for the council asks his question because he faces the gauntlet of Isaiah. Before they can move, they must know: Is Jesus the long-awaited king?

So they ask. Are you this one? Give us a sign!

In his reply, Jesus challenges them to destroy the human temple, which he promises to rebuild. His words carry the message repeated in his challenge to Nicodemus:

Look beyond the things and the motives of this world. Search for that which is of vital importance to heaven. God does not love the stones of this place. He has sent his Son

to restore the living temple to its place of glory.

As the Passover festival continues, many people saw the signs Jesus performed and believed in his name.

Times were hard, the government a sham. The people knew a fierce need for something more. They hungered for their Messiah's arrival.

But John tells us that Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people.

Our drama enters a new dimension here, signaled by the word, *entrust*. This implies that the Judean authority was among those seeking to connect with Jesus, but on their terms.

The Pharisees debated whether he might indeed be a new prophet. The Sadducees, those philosophers who discounted the existence of heaven or God's hand upon the lone human spirit, no doubt sniffed the political winds. They saw how fervent was the people's hope, and knew they had to tread lightly.

At this point, the drama's focus tightens to reveal a newcomer.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night.

Even those Council members who doubt Jesus is real must deal with the issue of control. Clearly their primary question is, can we turn this supposed prophet to our will. They assign one of their own to the task.

Nicodemus was the chief scribe among the Levites. Jesus himself confirms this when he refers to Nicodemus as *the* teacher of Israel.

Only the Levites moved among the people, teaching them the Laws of Moses. Nicodemus would thus be in touch with the common man. He would know the pulse of his people.

There is also the possibility that Nicodemus himself

wondered if perhaps Jesus was indeed a prophet, a righteous man, one who could help relieve the suffering of his people.

So Nicodemus, a member of the power elite, greets Jesus as he would a fellow teacher.

Rabbi, he says. Rabbi, we know you have come to guide us toward the Kingdom.

We, the leaders, the chief priests and Temple scholars, we acknowledge you. And we want to know one thing. Are you with us, or against us?

Nicodemus probably expects Jesus to negotiate. It is, after all, what any other Council member would do at such a moment.

The question foremost in Nicodemus' mind was, can an alliance be forged.

Jesus' response is something else entirely. His reply combines all the wisdom revealed in the previous mini-dramas. The Messiah's arrival, his ability to see the heart of man, the conflict that exists between man's motives and God's, our need for spiritual rebirth – all are illuminated.

Nicodemus speaks of strategy and strength. He plots and he analyzes.

Jesus speaks of the heart.

Nicodemus speaks from a position of strength. He can offer the support of the Judeans' only legal power structure.

Jesus *ignores* his strength, and speaks instead to the *man*.

Here in this exchange lies the eternal clash of wills. The desires of fallen man stand in endless conflict to God's call.

And here also is God's rejoinder, the only way to grasp his eternal purpose: *One lost soul at a time*.

Nicodemus is thrown off track, and responds with a question. His mocking tone resonates over the centuries. And at this point, something uniquely important occurs.

The Scriptures reveal one hundred and eighty-four questions that are asked of Jesus during his earthly ministry.

Jesus responds to one hundred and eighty of these with parables.

As a novelist, I find the Master's use of story to be completely natural. Jesus came bearing the truths of heaven. These must be uncovered slowly and with great care, lest the fire of truth consume all such divine rights as personal freedom and individual choice.

Thus we are taught through parables, so we might uncover only that which we are prepared to receive.

Thus does the acorn yield the oak, the seed yield the flower, the word yield the book.

And perhaps this tiny flame of understanding might yield a heart that becomes a beacon for the world.

Or perhaps the Messiah's words will spur this individual to cast aside his mantle of earthly power. Perhaps he will then rise up, and carry the sacrificial lamb's broken body to its temporary tomb.

Unlike the occasions where he uses parables, however, Jesus' response to Nicodemus' questions are as candid as they are challenging.

Jesus *redirects* their dialogue, taking aim at the one thing that matters most to God – this individual life. This unique and miraculous creation.

Jesus speaks of things unseen. He describes how the Spirit fills the heart's sail and blows the vessel of life with eternal constancy.

He shares with Nicodemus how this invisible hand of God

guides those who are born again, leading them to the True World.

The Messiah's words carry the hidden message that calls to the Levite's heart, just as it does to our own:

Turn. Turn, and come home.

Once we accept the divine invitation, he tells us, everything is changed. We are filled with the Spirit. We are called to a new compass heading, a new definition of life's course.

It is at this point that the divine declaration is made.

John's opening mystery is redefined. His introductory declaration is now fulfilled.

For God so loved the world, he embodied the eternal Word in fleshly form. Knowing full well what fallen man would do to this perfect being, this prince of peace, this Messiah.

God's love for us, his fallen children, is granted eternal testimony through this act of holy redemption. John's initial declaration has been fully revealed. The eternal significance is now illuminated for all time and beyond.

The Lord took the eternal Word and cloaked it in flesh.

He gave physical embodiment to his truest nature, his greatest attribute, his most awesome power.

For God so loved the world.

Let us go forth and share this awesome wonder with our fellow man.

<http://www.davisbunn.com/book/lion-of-babylon.htm>

Author: Davis Bunn



A powerful  
novel of  
suspense and  
hope in the  
Middle East.

