Latecomers to the Light
A Reflection on the “emergence” of
Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus
John 19:38-42

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The author brings to light two little-known characters of the Gospel of John, exploring their role and function within the Gospel, as the first to come under the transforming influence of the cross. She highlights especially the courage, extravagance, and fearlessness of their discipleship.

Introduction

Did the evangelist get it wrong by introducing, scarcely and skeletally at that, a new character, Joseph, at the funeral? What are we to make of the re-introduction of half-fledged Nicodemus, editorially announced as the one who faded into the night in chapter 3, seemingly unconvinced and uncommitted? Is he to be welcomed as he makes his appearance, like a long-lost relative, for the obsequies? Are these two lightly-drawn characters here in search of a plot, or are they serving some obscure Johannine purpose? Have they something to say to us, even though, in the text, neither directly speaks? Such questions raise the problematic of this gospel passage, John 19:38-42, and, by the same token, heighten its magnetic appeal.

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Context

The pericope (19:38-42) occurs within the Passion Narrative (18:1–19:42). It brings to closure the horrid yet translucent story of the self-gift on Calvary of Jesus, for the salvation of the world. Occurring, as it does, after the drama of the crucifixion, and following immediately on a passage with many parallel features of closure (19:31-37), this passage serves as a curtain-call on the earthly life of Jesus. The question of whether the evangelist merged two available deposition narratives, or decided to use both side by side, even with their contradictory elements (as v. 31 against v. 38), or whether we are dealing with two closures to the Passion narrative or one (Hemelsoet, 46), does not materially affect our concern here. Neither does the question of whether Joseph of Arimathea is a later interpolation into the narrative. Our purpose here is to shine a spotlight on the characters and actions of Joseph and Nicodemus, to reach some conclusions about their role and function in the Gospel, and to point out some implications for pastoral ministry. It will be helpful, however, to begin with a brief exegetical study of 19:38-42.

Exegesis

As a pericope of closure, echoing vv. 31-37 in some features, for example, in the request of “the Jews” (v. 31), this passage is clearly, in its structure, integral to the wider Passion narrative (18:1–19:42). Generally, through its motifs, and specifically through the construction of the characters of Joseph and Nicodemus, it is linked vitally with the entire Gospel, and with the Prologue in particular. Following Brown’s structural subdivisions of the Passion narrative (Brown, 1981: 981ff.), one notes the interesting parallels between the opening section, 18:1-12, the scene of Jesus’ arrest, and the passage under scrutiny. Elements of inclusio link the motifs of “garden” (18:1 and 19:41) and of “seizing” and “taking” (18:12 and 19:40). Of paramount importance is the textual link to what we already know of Nicodemus (19:38), with its editorial pointer to “the same one who had first come to Jesus by night,” a direct reference to 3:1-2. The scant information given on Joseph is precious, because this is his sole appearance in John’s Gospel, though he features in all four.

v. 38 “After this” (Gk. Μετὰ τὴν τοῦτον) is a linking phrase, situating the episode in time immediately after the death of Jesus. Haste is part of the atmosphere. Chronological time (χρόνος) can move swiftly, now that Jesus’ hour (χρόνος) has come. Jesus had things to say about that: “Any time is a good time for you . . . ” (7:6). Of Joseph only four things are told, as he is introduced.

(i) He comes from Arimathea. In John’s Gospel, knowing where one comes from is significant. It is a matter of identity. Joseph’s credentials are here. He is a
Judean. He is one of “the Jews.” The reader is meant to put on hold the little information given on him in the synoptic tradition, that he is “a rich man” (Matt 27:57), that “he owned a new tomb” (Matt 27:60), that “he was a prominent member of the Council,” who was “waiting for the kingdom of God” (Mark 15:43), that “he took courage” (Mark 15:44), that “he bought some linen cloth,” that “he rolled a stone in front of the tomb” (Mark 15:46), that “he was a good and upright man who had not consented to their (‘the Jews’) decision and action” (Luke 23:50-51).

(ii) John is content to state that Joseph is “a disciple of Jesus.” From this frugal delineation, the reader is meant to make the relevant connections.

(iii) There is a qualification: “but he is a secret one.” His position is not public.

(iv) The reason is given: “for fear of the Jews.” The antecedent reference to “the Jews” occurs in v. 31, where, as we learn later, their request stands in apposition to that of Joseph. The antithesis is startling. Their request is ignored. That of Joseph will be granted. The dramatic scene is set. Joseph, the Jew, is operating on two fronts, one public, the other private, because of fear, “fear of the Jews.”

v. 38b. Joseph “asked Pilate to let him remove the body of Jesus.” This may suggest that Joseph was a man of influence in the Sanhedrin, perhaps even a friend of Pilate. All four Gospels mention his initiatives in the burial scene, a fact which points up the certain significance of the man and his actions.

v. 38c. “Pilate gave permission.” This is Pilate’s last appearance in John’s Gospel, his final act of complicity in the Passion of Jesus. He goes off stage to give place to Nicodemus, who is proleptically introduced in “they came.” Again, we note two figures in apposition.

v. 39a. The next verse explains that “Nicodemus came as well.” He acts as partner in this duo of funereal ministers. The naming of both Joseph and Nicodemus is worth noting. Many of John’s characters, even those who carry weighty representative functions, remain anonymous. So does, for example, the Samaritan woman (4:1-42), the sick man at the pool of Bethzatha (5:1-17), and the man born blind (9:1-7). The fact that Joseph and Nicodemus are given names is telling. These are not “Undertakers Anonymous.” Their initiatives and their actions in this episode are highly personal. Neither are they “flat” or insignificant characters, as some have suggested (Galef, 1993). To label them minor characters would be less than fair.

v. 39b. As in the case of Joseph, though at greater length, four key items of information are provided on Nicodemus.
(i) He “came” (Ἠλῆφθεν) as well. He is no mere hanger-on, but an active partner in the preparations for burial. To “come to Jesus” is a richly significant phrase in John. It always indicates a movement in faith towards him (1:6, 1:39, 1:47, 3:2, 3:21, 4:7, 7:38, 7:50, 11:45, 19:39).

(ii) Nicodemus is identified as “the one who had, at first, come to Jesus by night.” The implication here is that this is a different kind of coming. It happens now in daylight, in the afternoon, because the Sabbath will not begin until nightfall. It is not under cover of darkness, like his first coming. It is qualitatively different.

(iii) “He brought an enormous amount of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.” Much scholarly ink has been spilled on the possible significance of this (see Sylva for an outright condemnation of Nicodemus and his actions. For arguments interpreting his actions as ambiguous or even pointless, see Howard-Brook, 432ff; and, for an appreciative lens on Nicodemus, see Auvers). It has been argued that his actions are dictated by panic, that they represent a perfunctory act by one Jew on behalf of “the Jews,” or even a cold act of courtesy. Most commentators, however, see the act of Nicodemus here as a personal act of love, an extravagant manifestation of commitment to the One who has paid the ultimate price of love.

(iv) “He (with Joseph) received (ἔλαβον) the body of Jesus.” Here we have an exegetical key to the actions of both men. The verb λαμβάνω or παραλαμβάνω is found sixteen times in John. In all cases it carries more than a literal meaning. It is found in the Prologue (1:11-12). To “receive” Jesus is to accept him personally in an act of faith. Those who “receive” Jesus are given “power to become children of God” (1:12). To “receive” or to “accept” Jesus is always a matter of personal choice, but it is empowered choice. Those who “come” to Jesus are “drawn” by the Father. Those who “receive” Jesus are given the power to do so.

Rather than leave Nicodemus in the limbo of ambiguity, to which he has been consigned by many, I would argue, from the text in John, that his “coming” to Jesus (19:39) is, in reality, a “coming out” into the public gaze as a disciple of Jesus. There is a “coming” in courage, a “receiving” in faith, and a definitive move from darkness to light.

The case of Joseph is easier to argue. Scholars do not disagree about his motivation, according to my reading. He is described as having already come to Jesus. He is “a disciple” (v. 38). But his going public on Calvary involves breaking the

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barrier of fear. He moves from closet discipleship in the atmosphere of “fear of the Jews” to “receiving” Jesus in the daylight of publicity.

v. 42 “They laid Jesus there.” In this final verse, it is worth noting that the object is Jesus, not just the body of Jesus, _svwma tou Ihsou_, as in antecedent verses, 38, 39, 40 above. There is a hint of something new here, perhaps even a hint of resurrection. At the least, it speaks of a spiritual breakthrough for Joseph and Nicodemus. Their ministry of love to the body of Jesus denotes the end, for them, of another type of Temple ministry. The New Temple, of which Jesus spoke (2:19), has become a reality for them. It is the end, but also a new beginning.

**Towards an Interpretation**

The essential questions, at this point, are: What happened to Joseph and to Nicodemus? How are they changed? And why? What makes them do what they do? Even though their paths converge on Calvary, their individual journeys merit separate treatment.

Joseph, it seems, has less to overcome. Even though all four evangelists provide details on him, John confines his pedigree of Joseph to two essentials: Joseph is “a disciple of Jesus” and he is “a secret disciple for fear of the Jews.” This is puzzling. As if an American Christian were afraid to be known as such “for fear of the Americans”! Joseph’s discipleship is portrayed as fragile and under threat from opposing forces. And the opposing forces are in his own camp! This is an indicator that he has already become identified as a dissenter, and there is synoptic confirmation that such is the case (Luke 23:51).

Nicodemus is a more complex figure. He appears only in John, and he comes with baggage from the past, which has led many commentators to damn him with faint praise! The evangelist, however, paints him more sympathetically, and more purposefully too! While he is not described in the text as “a disciple,” that he is a would-be one is implied. The reader is meant to follow the flashback to the conversation in 3:1-21, where Nicodemus first comes to Jesus by night. In John, “night” is often associated with blindness or betrayal (13:30), but the qualifying adverb “first” (_ prvto~_) provides the missing clue. This encounter (3:1-21) is a first faltering attempt. Nicodemus’ journey does not stop there. He knows that Jesus “comes from God” (3:2), even if he fails to grasp the meaning of being “born from above” (3:7). He exits from the conversation without demur, but with a question which in another context (Luke 1:34, “How can this be?”) opens a door to the Word becoming flesh (1:14). This provides the evangelist with an opportunity to elucidate a theology of the incarnation (3:16-17), “God loved the world so much that he sent his only son . . .” together with a promise (vv. 13, 14): “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that
everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” All this in the hearing of Nicodemus, and for his benefit!

Here, at the burial scene, the evangelist takes the reader to Nicodemus’ past in chapter 3, but, by a curious omission, does not refer to that crucial point where Nicodemus makes his appearance in 7:51-52. In the context of a discourse on “living water,” Jesus says: “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me,” and the evangelist adds: “He was speaking of the Spirit which those who believed in him were to receive, for there was no Spirit as yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified” (v. 39). The setting is relevant, and Nicodemus is central to it. The Pharisees are divided among themselves as to the claims of Jesus. The police seem to be likewise divided because they return, having failed to agree on arresting him. The Pharisees ask what they think is a rhetorical question: “Have any of the authorities believed in him?” Any of the Pharisees? (v. 48). Nicodemus becomes the affirmative answer to those questions. Here he takes courage, arguing that the law should not judge anyone without “giving him a hearing” and “discovering what he is about” (v. 51). The Pharisees rightly surmise that the “discovering” mentioned by Nicodemus is autobiographical. It has taken him another step along the road to becoming a disciple of Jesus, and they query him directly as to whether he is a Galilean (v. 52).

This is the Nicodemus who figures beside Joseph in 19:38, where it is emphasized three times in the space of two verses that he “came” to Jesus. Holding the motifs of “life,” “light,” “Spirit,” “living water,” and “discovery” from 3:1-21 and 7:37-52, and noting the intentional use of the richly-laden verb “receive” in 19:40, as applying to both Joseph and Nicodemus, it seems obvious that there are key messages here.

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**Love Changes Everything**

The death/glorification of Jesus, supreme act of love, supreme sign of God’s love for humankind, is the source, in John, of new life. It is impossible to overemphasize its significance as the center of Christian life. Moltmann states it well: “The center is occupied, not by Cross and Resurrection, but by the Resurrection of the Crucified Christ, which qualifies his death as something that happened for us, and the Cross of the Risen Christ, which reveals and makes accessible his resurrection from the dead” (Moltmann, 204).
Joseph and Nicodemus are the first in the Gospel of John to come within the transforming influence of the cross. They are the first to experience the drawing power of the One who is “lifted up” (7:39). The promise given in 8:28: “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he” is realized here, not in a nebulous way, but concretely in the lives of two disciples-on-the-way. According to the evangelist, they are the first recipients of the Spirit promised in 7:37-39: “Let the one who believes in me come and drink.” The cry of Jesus in 19:28: “I thirst” (Διψάω) now issues in the quenching of another thirst among “those who believed in him” (7:39). The Spirit is poured out, now that Jesus has been lifted up. Joseph and Nicodemus are the first disciples to taste the transforming power of the Spirit, and they are powerfully changed (The case of Mary and the Beloved Disciple is material for another study. They are commissioned before the “lifting up” of Jesus). They do not need to cry out, as the centurion in Matthew 27:54, “Indeed this man was the Son of God,” because they have already recognized Jesus as such. But they need to break through fear. They need to be empowered to “emerge” in public. This is what happens on Calvary. By their deeds they show that they now have “come to the light.” The “lifting up” of Jesus is their liberation from the prison of the past.

The Transformation of Joseph and Nicodemus

It may be worth asking: “What does the transformation of these two men look like?” I think it looks like courage, like extravagance, and like transgression.

*It looks like courage.* Even though John does not emphasize this aspect as Mark does (15:43), courage is implied. To go to Pilate and claim the body of Jesus is an amazingly brave act. In an atmosphere where all the apostles had fled (with the possible exception of the Beloved Disciple), they risked certain censure from both Jewish and Roman elders. They risked the opprobrium of the Sanhedrin, as well as exclusion from that body. They incurred ritual defilement by touching the body of a corpse, and double defilement because it was that of a condemned criminal. Their action meant that they were excluded from Passover celebrations for a week at least, and perhaps indefinitely. They were writing themselves into Jewish history as “Galileans,” as followers of “The Nazarene.” For both, their careers as Jewish leaders and teachers were at an end. Their action, as respected members of the Sanhedrin, in requesting custody of the body of Jesus, in a culture where criminals were refused burial rites, and within hours of the beginning of the Sabbath, can only be described as brave beyond measure. They were in a new place, swimming against the current, ignoring the certain cost. This is the stuff of heroism. This is “doing the truth in love.” This is “coming out into the light.”

*It looks like extravagance.* Much has been written about the superabundance of Nicodemus’ spices. He brought a hundred pounds, or the equivalent of seventy-
five pounds by current standards. This is not only beyond what might be required at any burial. It is even more than would be expected at the burial of a king (2 Chron 16:4, burial of King Asa). The cost is a princely sum. All the ritual associations with the burial are luxurious, extravagant, regal. The linen cloths, the pristine tomb, the garden setting (*inclusio* with 18:1 and probably with Gen 2:8) all speak of a kingly burial. Joseph and Nicodemus bring both themselves and their costly gifts to the service of the One they love and recognise as the Messiah. Deeds speak. Nothing is spared. He who was rejected and denied by his own (18:2) and crucified between two criminals (18:17) now receives the honor which is his due as king, from two who have finally come to light as his own. Moreover, as Jews and leaders (this is where they come from, 19:38), they are well-placed to represent that “coming” to Jesus of “opposing forces,” because, when all is told, “salvation is of the Jews.”

*It looks like transgression,* or the crossing of a boundary. To cross the threshold of fear, especially “fear of the Jews,” to risk the scorn of their colleagues in Jewish leadership, as well as possible expulsion from the synagogue, with all that this meant as heritage and realm of significance, to walk out of the security of the past into the full light of aligning with Jesus the Nazarene, this, from a Jewish standpoint, looks like transgression. It is truly a crossing-over, a new departure. It is, in fact, a Passover. Joseph and Nicodemus have gone beyond the world of conflicting loyalties into the world of single-minded allegiance. They have burned their boats, and there is no going back. Salvation is “of the Jews,” but it has taken them one pace beyond.

This “beyond” is a place of silence, a place beyond words. Their ministerial role is shrouded in silence, reverencing the mystery. Joseph and Nicodemus have fallen foul of commentators because they do not speak here in 19:38-42. But there are places and events where words are superfluous. Surely this is one of them. It is contemplation time.

**Conclusion**

The evangelist did not make a mistake. Joseph and Nicodemus are no mere props in the larger drama. They are integral to the good news according to John. Their portraits carry the core of Johannine theology. They represent both
facets of Christian discipleship, the gift and the journey. They are icons and beacons for the “explorer-type” Christian, whose initial response to the invitation of Jesus is questioning, hearing him out, discovering (uncovering) the truth and the light. Part of their exploring and their honest search is that they are willing to take a stand when crisis comes.

In that moment on Calvary of walking into the teeth of danger, Joseph and Nicodemus experience the miracle of being “drawn” irresistibly by the grace of the One who is lifted up. At the cross, they come to freedom. As Jews at the cross, they are freed from “fear of the Jews.” A chasm is crossed. A new horizon opens up, as they walk, latecomers and partners, into the light. Some undertaking this! The evangelist would not have us miss it!

References


