

THE INTERVIEW WITH NICODEMUS.

JOHN iii. 1-21.

THIS interesting incident, with its apparent independent position in the divine biography, is really connected by a proper particle, with the concluding verses of the preceding chapter. So, at ch. ii. 23 we read, "Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did. But Jesus did not commit himself (*ouk episteuen heauton*, did not trust himself) unto them, because he knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man." And now coming to the third chapter, it should read "But there was a man (*een de anthropos*) of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came to Jesus," etc. The reader will see that the connective particle *de* is entirely omitted from our translation as though it were redundant: which it cannot be; for it is clearly needed, in its general adversative force, to express the Evangelist's meaning. Men, generally, even when professing to believe in his name, he did not confide himself to. He, of all who have worn the human form, knew men best; loved them most; but, as a rule, he did not trust himself to them. But there was one man who had seen, and been influenced by, his miracles, to whom he did trust himself, a Pharisee, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; who having come to him by night, that the Teacher might have the more leisure to explain himself, Jesus received him kindly, conversed with him frankly, explained the Messianic office patiently, trusted to his judgment and candor in declaring against the Pharisaic idea of the Messiah, and exhibiting him in his character of sufferer for human salvation.

Restoring this particle *de*, and thus connecting with ch. ii. 23-25, we see why our Lord permitted to Nicodemus this deep, wide vision of his scheme: of himself: while to the masses who were attracted by him, he dealt in parables, prudently keeping himself uncommitted to them. He was frank with Nicodemus, because he could trust him: he knew him, and knew that he would not by any rashness or hostility, embarrass his work.

Notice, further, that this man being a Pharisee and a Ruler, was versed in the traditions of the Elders, and looking for a Messiah according to them, did not see in Jesus the evidence of his Messiahship. Therefore when he says "Rabbi, we know that thou art a TEACHER come from God: for no man can do these miracles (ch. ii. 23) that thou dost, except God be with him;" it was an elliptical manner of introducing the Messiahship, a subject familiar to both parties, and needing no such preliminary detail, as would be required by a subject unfamiliar to either of them. The full sense of the opening address would be "Rabbi, in those miracles thou hast been doing, we see the marks of a TEACHER sent from God; but we do not see the marks given in the traditions that thou art the MESSIAH, our expected KING." To this Jesus answered, "Except a man be born again, he CANNOT see the kingdom of God;" as if he had said, "The difficulty is in yourself; not in me: I exhibit the Scriptural marks of my being the Messiah; but you, influenced by your blinding traditions, have lost the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures, and need, in common with your countrymen a change equivalent to a new birth. Your prophet Ezekiel foretold you of this necessity of spirituality, in the days of the Messiah; 'Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I

give you, and a new spirit will I put within you : and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes,' etc. So, in spirit, spake all the prophets, pointing out the change in Israel, as to spirituality, in Messiah's day : Israel was to be saved from sin, in common with the Gentiles, who were to come to his rising : this great change, this new birth has not occurred : the king has come ; you *cannot* see him." So, that our Lord does not receive him, with an abrupt annunciation of a doctrine utterly foreign from the object of his visit ; for the very point he had in view, was to inquire of him, how one who had none other than the credentials of a *teacher* come from God, should be accepted as the Messiah, of which fact he, Jesus, had no Pharisaic evidence to produce.

Nicodemus, bewildered, because of his improper training, exclaims, " How can a man be born when he is old ? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb and be born ? " He has, apparently, no power of concentrating his mind upon the actual meaning of the Scriptures, in their teaching of the coming deliverer ; and Jesus aids him by a reference to the passage of Ezekiel ; " Except a man be born of water and the Spirit (the very substance of the prophecy) he cannot enter into the kingdom of God ; " he is not fit for, nor can he enjoy such a state of affairs, as the prophet foretold. " That which is born of the flesh is flesh ; (there would be no such change as Ezekiel and the other prophets described, could your idea be realized ;) and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit : (in no other way can this change occur, except by the power of the Spirit : had our Lord meant that " the water " would be a regenerating force, he would have added, And that which is born of water, is water. But his mentioning

the water was because of its occurrence in the prophets, as a figure of the cleansing from sin in Messiah's day.) "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye (not *thou* only; but the nation, all) must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth (willeth) 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." As they were then sitting within doors, they heard the sound of the passing wind; but Nicodemus could not have known the precise point from which it had come, nor its precise opposite; nor had he anything to do with the putting of it in motion: but he heard the sound thereof, and had no doubt of the fact of its being then moving. So the divine Spirit comes unbidden into the nation, the family, the soul, and his regenerating acts are known in their effects.

"How can these things be?" is the last recorded question of the mystified Nicodemus. Not mystified by the statements of Jesus; but, by the errors and mysteries of his traditional culture; and now with an oppressive sense of his mistake, struggling toward the truth, which was faintly glimmering as yet, like a torch in the hand of his kind and patient guide. "Art thou a master (*didaskalos*, teacher) of Israel, and knowest not these things?" Is it becoming that a ruler and teacher in Israel, should be ignorant of the precepts by which he was to rule, and of the lessons he was to teach? You have been led out from the true meaning of the Scripture, by your traditions and cabala; while my disciples testify of what they know and have seen. "If I have told you earthly things (quoting your prophets, using as they do earthly figures, with which you should be supposed to be familiar, to explain heavenly, spiritual, things that are beyond your vision) and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things? And (when it is a fact) no man (*oudeis*) hath ascended

up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, the Son of man which is in heaven." No one in human form, now on earth, except myself, the Son of man, has ever been in heaven, so as to be familiar with heavenly things, and able to understand me, should I speak directly of those things without using earthly things as figures.

And now, with further reference to your erroneous views of the Messiah, and his reign, "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness (as a healer, to save the people who had been bitten by the poisonous serpents; so that if a serpent (*nachash*) had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived), even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." The Messiah was to bruise the head of the serpent (*nachash*, *Gen.* iii. 15), who had bitten not the descendants of Abraham only, but the human race: and as the serpent of brass was in the likeness of the poisonous serpent, so the Messiah was to be lifted up, "in the likeness of sinful flesh," that the dying sinner might look to him, and live. "For God so loved the world (not Abraham's family only, but the descendants of Adam, those born of Eve; for the first, wide, all-embracing promise was to the race, in the garden, where the race had been bitten by the serpent (*nachash*); and it was to be fulfilled in Abraham's family, for the benefit of the world, the race; not that the Abrahamic family was to be the Messiah, but was to produce him) 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; (what kind of fulfilment of his promise would this be? This would be bruising the posterity of Eve; not, the serpent's head. The treading down the nations, for the elevation of Abraham's family, was a singular idea of

the predicted intention, to bless, through that family, 'all the nations of the earth;') but that the world through him might be saved." The Messiah was to be a blesser, a benefactor, not a destroyer; a sympathizing Saviour, bearing our sins; not despising men, but despised and rejected of them: not beating them down to place his foot upon their necks, but bearing their griefs to be wounded for their transgressions, to bear the stripes they merited, to die that they might live. *Isai.* liii. He came a light into the world; but men loved darkness and not light: the light distressed them; not that the Messiah would have it so; just the reverse; but because they were sinful, and loved to sin; they delighted in the bite of the serpent; and their only condemnation was, not on Messiah's part but on their own; to stay away from him, was their condemnation, but to come to him, was their life.

EXCEPT THE FATHER DRAW HIM.

JOHN vi. 44.—No man can come into me, except the father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.

IN this and similar passages, we understand our Lord as making allusion to the preceding dispensation; and especially to the "oracles of God," that had been committed to the Jewish people. To them is he speaking, when he employs such words; and the substratum of his thoughts and expressions, was his knowledge,

that they looked upon his teaching as subversive of that of Moses; as being a novelty; never before heard of by their learned men; hurtful to them; opposed to the divine counsel; blasphemous; worthy not only of rejection, but requiring the death of such a heretical teacher.

The compassionate Saviour spared no pains in his efforts to correct this error. He endeavored to show, that so far from his teaching being in opposition to that of Moses, the divine agent in the preceding dispensation, it was the fulfilment of it: that not he, but they had abandoned the teaching of Moses: "had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?" *John* v. 46, 47. My words are in exact accord with his writings; and as you do not understand him, how can you understand me, teaching as I do what he taught: for I bring no new thing to you; nothing originating with me; I am merely trying to lead you back to Moses, and through him to God, whose instructions you have forgotten; and therefore my doctrine seems new to you. You "have committed two evils; you have forsaken God the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." *Jerem.* ii. 13. You have turned away from the writings of Moses, through whom the Father gave you the word, the living water; and provided yourselves with the traditions, inventions of men, that can contain no instruction. This is your error. You, not I, have forsaken God; and sought another source of instruction: although "It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God:" yet you have turned away from the Father's words, to the words of the elders, tradition. The Father speaks to you through his words, delivered by Moses and the prophets; those holy men who spake as they were moved by

the Holy Ghost; nothing else is reliable; "to the law and to the testimony: if any speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." *Isai.* viii. 20. "Every man therefore that hath heard, and learned of the Father, (hath attended to the meaning of the divine word, narrating the election of Abraham, the organization of his family as the *souche* of 'the bruiser of the serpent's head,' the bearer of human iniquities; and hath learned, understood these teachings of the Father,) cometh unto me." Of course, because I am he, of whom "Moses and the prophets" wrote: and every Jew that has reaped the intended benefit of that system, comes to me and accepts me as the promised, predicted Messiah. It is in this manner that the Father gives, transmits to me the result of the Mosaic institute in its action upon candid, spiritual Jews. Those who have learned from it, to look for one like unto Moses, the leader of a dispensation; a Messiah typified by the High Priest, bearing the names of the people, offering atonement for their sins; and typified in the victims and blood shedding, without which there was no remission: these he gives me: he would have given all; but they would not heed, would not learn: but as many as heard and learned were thus secured to me; and I will acknowledge and elevate them, in the last day of Israel, when their fatal mistake shall bring them down into the depth of ruin.

Our Lord discloses his meaning in the use of the words *give* and *draw*. It is not that the Father gives, draws, and then the given, the drawn hear and learn. But those who hear and learn are thus given, drawn. Every such Jew came. How could those come, who did not see in him, the marks of the Messiah as laid down in the traditions, for which they had abandoned the word of God?

Surely, the subject is sufficiently intelligible, without resorting to the hypothesis, that the Father selected

certain Jews, and gave these to his Son to be saved: making their salvation to turn, not upon their own choice, upon their acceptance of Jesus; but, upon his own choice: God's choice of the sinner: selecting him from others in circumstances precisely similar. Where was the objection to all being treated alike? Was not the merit of Christ's blood sufficient to atone for all? Was there not grace sufficient for all? Was the defect in the love of God? the love of him who "so loved the world, as to give his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth, should not perish, but have everlasting life." It is not "whosoever is elected, given, drawn by the Father;" but, "whosoever believeth;" and if it be that no one but a sovereignly elected Jew could believe; why was it not, "whosoever the Father hath elected," etc.? Was it to mock the miserable Jew, by apparently offering him a choice, when such an act was impossible? This cannot, then, be the key to this phraseology; that the Father gave, drew by sovereign choice. No: it was as the proper result of the teachings of the Father through Moses and the prophets.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not." Matth. xxiii. 37. Luke xiii. 34. Here, now, is the clear and distinct statement, that the Jews effectually resisted the will of him to whom "all power in heaven and earth" belonged; power to elect, power to pass by, power to save, power to destroy; and yet he could not save those people he was grieving over: he had chosen them; they were "his own;" but "his own received him not;" he "would;" but they "would not;" and the human "would not" triumphed over the divine "would," and their house was left unto them desolate. If we have varied from the letter or sense of the sacred record, we have not yet perceived it.

Therefore, we present our exposition, that by the phraseology of the passage under consideration, and of those similar to it, our Lord refers to the result of the divine preceding dispensation, as accounting for the fact that the masses of Jews rejected, while some received, him: those who received him were those who had realized the teaching and power of the Mosaic types: they had heard and learned of the Father; and, therefore, came to Jesus as the predicted Christ.

It is interesting to notice here, a remarkable passage of *Acts* ii. 14-21. The apostles having been instructed to await "the promise of the Father," the coming of the Holy Ghost; when that promise came, and they were "all filled with the Holy Ghost," Peter, standing up with the eleven, declared, "this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel; And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh," etc. The "last days," *i. e.* the time of Christ. "I will pour out of my Spirit," the wonder that had just occurred. Here then "the promise of the Father," was a promise he had made through Joel, in the preceding dispensation (see also what is said at ver. 33): which is confirmatory of our hypothesis, in no small degree. The utterances and symbols of the preceding dispensation, were the utterances made, and symbols held forth, by the Father to draw men to Jesus; and no Jew who had realized their force failed to come to him and receive the eternal life that he brought.

NO MAN TAKETH IT FROM ME.

JOHN x. 18.—No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.

HERE is a distinct statement that our Saviour's death was voluntary. Not in the sense, that he did not resist his murderers; and, like Cicero, when overtaken by his assassins, who refusing to allow his faithful slaves to defend him, ordered the litter to be set down, and stretching forth his head, submitted it to the sword of the ungrateful Popilius. That was voluntary. But the words of the friend of sinners mean more than that: they include that; for "he was brought as a lamb to the slaughter:" but he says plainly, "no man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself." He died in a manner, in which no one of the human race, except himself, could die. Men commit suicide; slay themselves, as the word suicide means. But Jesus did not commit suicide; he slew not himself; he died; he lay down his life; at the moment he so willed it, death occurred; he ceased to live, as that phrase applies to man; he died. After voluntarily suffering all that he designed to suffer, for the redemption of humanity; after he had accepted in his own person, the anguish due on the part of humanity, man, the race, to the last particle, he by his own volition, died, lay down his life.

We cannot measure such power. The *modus* of its exercise lies beyond the stretch of our comprehension. Though when we call to mind, that he had "power to take it again;" we seem to think ourselves to understand, that if he could do this, he could do that. But it is mere seeming. We can do nothing more than refuse or accept the statement: he, of himself, without

being murdered, or committing suicide, lay down his life: he, of himself, unaided, unresurrected, took back his life: having power to die, and power to live, to be exercised at his pleasure.

True, it is recorded, that "they crucified him." Peter said to the Jews, "him—ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain," etc. *Acts* ii. 23. Stephen did not hesitate to charge his countrymen with having murdered the Messiah, as their fathers had murdered those who prophesied his coming: "Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of that Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers." *Acts* vii. 52. And the charge was just: to all moral intents they betrayed and murdered that "Just One," "killed the Prince of life:" they were as guilty, as if they could have really carried out their malice aforethought, their murderous purpose: they were certainly guilty: they intended murder, went as far as they could go in executing their intentions, and, to all human appearance, as well as to their own satisfaction, they succeeded. They slew him, and hanged him on a tree: or, more accurately, "Whom they slew, having hanged him upon the cross; (*xulon*, an instrument of death made of wood) *hon ancilon kremasantes epi xulon*. *Acts* x. 39. They did their utmost. But, how could human force actually kill one who had life in himself? Not a derived life, such as ours; derived, and suspended upon the action of machinery that another can stop; sources of supply which another can cut off. No hand can control the existence of one, whose life depends upon the action of no machinery; upon no source of supply other than his own will. "In him was life" (*zoote*) *John* i. 4. "For as the Father hath life (*zoote*) in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life (*zoote*) in himself," etc. *Ib.* v. 26.

"I am the resurrection and the life" (*zoote*), etc. *John* xi. 25. "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (*zoote*), etc. *Ib.* xiv. 6. Such a life as that, underived, independent, could not be crushed out by any human force. "No one (*oudeis*) taketh it from me:" they endeavored to do so; seized him; dragged him before Pilate, and when he seeing that he was the very personification of innocence, truth, patience, unselfishness, and every moral excellence, would have released him; a tumult was excited; clamors of "If thou let this man (*touton*) go, thou art not Cæsar's friend," etc., *Ib.* xix. 12, arose from those who would have as gladly murdered Cæsar, as they wished to murder their unresisting victim; the judge, the Roman magistrate, seeing the prisoner apparently helpless, without one advocate to plead his cause, without one soldier to fight in his defense; looking at the tumultuous Jews, and the silent, patient, seemingly defenseless prisoner; "then delivered he him unto them to be crucified. And they took Jesus and led him away." *Ib.* xix. 16. They crucified him "and two other with him;" and those "two other" died at their hands; their lives were taken, and they intended taking the life of Jesus, they thought they had done so, but were mistaken; "no one taketh it from me; but, I lay it down of myself."

The life that he lay down he took again: he had "power to take it again;" a power of which we can have no conception worthy of being mentioned; self-existence being far beyond the ken of those, who know nothing of even derived existence, except the fact, and some of its sequences. Himself says "and the third day he shall be raised again:" *Matth.* xvii. 23. The "exceeding sorry" disciples knew not by whom, and the very last of their thoughts was, that it was to be by himself, by his own power. No human mind but found it difficult to believe, that even God could raise the dead; and

as to one dwelling with them in human form, being supposed to be able to accomplish such a deed, it could not enter into the wildest dream of fancy.

Luke ix. 22, tells us that he made known to his disciples, that "the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be slain, and be raised the third day:" all this as if he were to be entirely as passive in the resurrection as in the rejection. Still, the revelation he has given us is the light by which we read all such passages: "the third day he was raised" by his own power, that awful depth and vast of force by which "he had life in himself." Hear Peter; "—whom God hath raised from the dead:" *Acts* iii. 15; "—whom God raised from the dead:" *Ib.* iv. 10; "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus," etc. *Ib.* v. 30. Hear Paul; "But God raised him from the dead:" *Ib.* xiii. 30; "But he whom God raised again, saw no corruption." *Ib.* xiii. 37; "Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?" *Ib.* xxvi. 8. This seeming discrepancy is dissolved into perfect consistency, by the revealed concert of action, the perfect harmony, between the Father and the Son; which also must be accepted as a revealed fact, whose *modus* is incomprehensible. "The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand." *John* iii. 35; "The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise. * * * That all should honor the Son, even as they honor the Father." *Ib.* v. 19, 23. "Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me:" *Ib.* xiv. 11; "Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee." *Ib.* xvii. 1; "Sir, we remember that that deceiver said while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again." *Matth.* xxvii. 63; "Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy

this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. * * * But he spake of the temple of his body." *John* ii. 19, 21. All these testimonies find their harmonious centre here, in the passage we are discussing; "I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father." *Ib.* x. 18. "I looked, and there was none to help; and I wondered that there was none to uphold: therefore mine own arm brought salvation unto me." *Isai.* lxiii. 5. The Redeemer assumed man's guilt and its penalty: died voluntarily in payment of the penalty, and to the full extent of what was due, absorbing its eternity in his own infinity; and then "rose for our righteousness:" in him the human race is righteous before the law. And if any one will now die he destroys himself by rejecting life.

Why then allow the Jews to proceed in their wicked intent, to a seeming murder, and bring upon themselves the awful guilt of blood? If the atonement was really made by the voluntary death of the Christ, why involve the Jews in the guilt of an unnecessary act? Perhaps, no one can fully answer those, or similar questions. To us, it appears that their guilt was not increased, by allowing them to proceed to extremity, upon the revealed principle, that the hater is a murderer; and the man of a lustful eye, an adulterer. Their guilt was not increased, but only manifested by the overt act. It was an awful spectacle of the condition of humanity, as to its need of a Mediator, a Saviour. For the Jews were an elect nation: no nation on earth so favored as it had been: possessing the oracles of God: all pains taken to keep them separate from other people: prophet after prophet sent to them: every advantage given: and now this judgment upon the Christ, was not the work of the ignorant, profane mass; but the deliberate deed of the representative men, the great sanhedrim; those making

the loudest profession of Judaism; the most learned in the traditions of the Elders. In a grand sense, these were not only the leaders of the Jews, but the very *elite* of mankind: the most enlightened of the human race.

Therefore, here, at the wondrous cross, "On which the Prince of glory died," we have the dreadful spectacle of the extreme depth of wickedness and folly to which humanity had descended. What superlative vice to hate, and murder that Just One! What amazing folly to reject such a Saviour! Men who swarmed like bees around any pretender, who proposed insurrection, fight, bloodshed, and the glitter of earthly glory; as from a leper, shrunk away from him who held the truth as essential to the overthrow of error, as the light to the putting an end to darkness. These the choice men of earth, and yet so vicious, and such fools! The gloomy spectacle demonstrated the need of a Saviour. The darkness was deeper than the thick darkness of Egypt: THOHU and BOHU had returned: and the VOICE had also returned "Let there be LIGHT!"

It is but a mere conceit, that considers the proceedings against our Lord, as entirely, exclusively Jewish. This is but repeating the error into which the family of Abraham wandered. There is nothing that separates Jew from Gentile but institutions. There is no distinction that is natural. Humanity enfolds the Jewish nature, as wholly as the Gentile nature. Man is the genus, and the distinction of species is not degrees of wickedness, or folly. In those respects man is a unit. The present generation of Jews did not murder Christ; nor any present nation of Christendom accept him. Men murdered him; men accepted him; and no one but man, either crucifies him afresh, or accepts him to this day. Salvation is not for Jew or Gentile, except as man.