

## Making Sense of Nicodemus

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(19 April 2016)

The figure of Nicodemus appears three times in the Fourth Gospel, in conversation with Jesus by night (3:1-21), in a meeting of the high priests and Pharisees where he warns against condemning Jesus without giving him the hearing required by the Law (7:50-52), and at the burial of Jesus, where, working with Joseph of Arimathea, he provides a rich abundance of spices (19:38-42). The three passages raise a number of intriguing questions. One is whether it is possible to detect the sources and the compositional history of the story. A second is the historical issue of whether Nicodemus can be identified with any known first-century individual. The third is what a reader is to make of the function of the character of Nicodemus.

The initial account bears a generic similarity to the story of the rich young man who asks what he must do to be saved (Mt 19:16-22, Mk 10:17-22, Lk 18:18-23). If that story, in its Synoptic form or coming from an independent tradition, is the inspiration for this account, the evangelist has thoroughly reworked it. The questioner is named. He does not explicitly ask about salvation, although Jesus responds to him on the subject. Jesus does not tell him he must obey the Torah or give all to the poor, but that he must be born “anotnen.” The Johannine reworking may have come in two phases, the first reflecting on the theme of birth and the spirit (vv 3-10) and the second on the significance of the coming of the Son of Man (vv 11-20).<sup>1</sup>

Instead of an anonymous rich young man, this story features Nicodemus, “a man of the Pharisees” and “a leader of the Jews” (Jn 3:1), whose name means “Conqueror of the People.” Scholars have suspected that the figure reflects a known individual.<sup>2</sup> Rabbinic sources mention a Naqdimon ben Gurion who was one of the wealthiest men in Jerusalem at the time of the Roman siege.<sup>3</sup> His wealth and piety are celebrated in b.Ta’an 19b-20a. b.Avod.Zar 25a adds that he had a nickname “Buni,” possibly recalling David’s commander Benaiah (2 Sam 23:20-23, 1 Chr 11:22-25, 27:5-6), who became Solomon’s commander in chief (2 Kgs 2:28-35, 4:4). That nickname appears in a curious Rabbinic list of five disciples of Jesus (b.San 43a): Mattai, Naqqai, Nesor, Buni, Todah.<sup>4</sup> Identification of John’s Nicodemus with Naqdimon is unlikely, given the reverence for Naqdimon in Rabbinic sources. The character may, as Bauckham suggests, be an older kinsman, perhaps an uncle, of the famous Naqdimon.

<sup>1</sup>For this hypothesis, see von Wahlde **Gospel 3**/565-566.

<sup>2</sup>For a history of the discussion, see Bauckham **Nicodemus**.

<sup>3</sup>bGitt 565a, cf Lam.R 1/5:31, Eccles.R 7/12:1, Avot d’ Rabbi Nathan A6.

<sup>4</sup>[For another interpretation of these names, compare Brooks **Five 51f** - The Editors]

Josephus (War 2:451) mentions a Gorion son of Nicodemus<sup>5</sup> who is part of a trio who accepts the surrender of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem in 66. He also mentions a Joseph, son of Gorion (War 2:563) and a Gorion, son of Joseph (War 4:159) who play significant roles in the revolt. Bauckham suggests that they are all related to a Nicodemus, an envoy from Aristobolus II to Pompey (Ant 14:17). These figures also probably illustrate the practice of naming children in a family for grandparents and uncles. They further confirm that the name Nicodemus was associated with a rich and influential family who were not priests but probably were pious Pharisees, the kind of character on stage in John 3. Plausible characterization does not, of course, mean that the reports are historical.

Nicodemus fades away in John 3, apparently baffled by Jesus' teaching. He seems sympathetic but uncommitted in John 7, and his peers think that he, a Judaeen, is becoming a Galilean (Jn 7:52), in effect being "born anew." Evaluation of his behavior at Jesus' burial has been debated. Many therefore find him an ambiguous character and wonder about the function of ambiguity.<sup>6</sup> Yet the hundred liters of myrrh and aloes that he provides for the burial is an extravagant and very public display of admiration and affection, a gesture fit for a disciple.<sup>7</sup> If so, he does finally, at some level, make the kind of response that Jesus calls for, finding a way to God by recognizing who Jesus is. Whatever his historical connections, Nicodemus does what many Johannine characters do, illustrating Jesus' alluring and ultimately transformative power.

### **Comment**

*(The Editors)*

It may also be possible to work backward from the burial. The author of John found Mark unsatisfying, and often replaced a Markan unit with something better.<sup>8</sup> One unsatisfactory Markan character is Joseph of Arimathea, introduced at the last minute as one "looking for the Kingdom of God" (15:43). John's Nicodemus may be providing a backstory for an analogous character, who in Jn 3 is indeed looking for the Kingdom, and in Jn 7 does what Joseph should have done: question the legality of the Sanhedrin proceedings. His excessive burial gift may be just Johannine verisimilitude: evoking someone known to John's readers as having possessed immense wealth.

### *Works Cited*

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 E Bruce Brooks. The Jesus Five. *Alpha* v2 (2022) 90-97  
 R Alan Culpepper. Nicodemus: The Travail of New Birth, in Hunt et al ed, *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, Mohr Siebeck (2013) 239-259  
 Urban C von Wahlde. *The Gospel and Letters of John*. 3v Eerdmans 2010

<sup>5</sup>If, that is, one follows the Latin; the Greek reads Nicomedes.

<sup>6</sup>For a useful survey of scholarship, see Culpepper **Nicodemus**.

<sup>7</sup>So Bauckham **Nicodemus** 31.

<sup>8</sup>Note for example his relocation of the Cleansing of the Temple.