



**University of  
Zurich**<sup>UZH</sup>

**Zurich Open Repository and  
Archive**

University of Zurich  
University Library  
Strickhofstrasse 39  
CH-8057 Zurich  
[www.zora.uzh.ch](http://www.zora.uzh.ch)

---

Year: 2023

---

## **Nicodemus. I: New Testament**

Frey, Jörg

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/ebr>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-239296>

Book Section

Published Version

Originally published at:

Frey, Jörg (2023). Nicodemus. I: New Testament. In: Frey, Constance M.; Gemeinhardt, Peter; LeMon, Joel Marcus; Römer, Thomas C; Schröter, Jens; Walfish, Barry Dov; Ziolkowski, Eric. Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception : Volume 21 Negative Theology – Offspring. Berlin: De Gruyter, 410-412.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/ebr>

*stratelatis* narrated the first miracle of St. Nicholas: he saved three officers who were, without actually being guilty, accused of treachery to the emperor. In a prayer, they invoked the bishop as intercessor before God who “fulfils the desire of all who fear him and hears their cry and saves them” (Ps 145:9 [NIV]; *Praxis de stratelatis* 19). Nicholas appeared to the emperor in a dream and menaced him with praying to “Christ, the great king” (ibid. 20). The first comprehensive collection of stories and miracles was composed by Michael the Studite in the 9th century; this *Life* became the archetype of other *Lives*, including the contemporary *Encomium Methodii*, the 9th-century *Life* which was read in the Byzantine Synaxary and rewritten by Symeon Metaphrastes (d. 987), as well as the first Latin *Life* written by John the Deacon (9th cent.) and the *Golden Legend* compiled by Jacobus de Voragine after 1260. The translation of Nicholas’s relics to Bari in 1087 made the saint’s veneration enormously popular in the medieval west – one of the first literary echoes is the *Prayer to St Nicholas* by Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109) who visited the shrine in 1098.

The deeds and miracles of Nicholas during his lifetime touch upon different fields of biblical reception (especially the gospels): he provided financial support for poor people (as a young man, he saved three young maidens from being forced to prostitution, due to lack of money – hence three golden bullet as the saint’s attribute); he rescued seamen from shipwreck in stormy sea; he saved his city from famine by requisition of grain from ships which happened to stay in the harbor (but of course the ship-owners were reimbursed for this!). According to the *Vita per Michaellem* (ch. 30), he was venerated as equal to the apostles and named “savior” (σωτήρ) like Christ and the emperor. Nicholas thus exemplified what it meant to follow Jesus in everyday life. Since there had never been a formal canonization, the narrative remained in flux, resulting in a plurality of Nicholas images in different cultural and confessional settings. The late medieval story that the saint revived three young students which had been murdered by a deceitful innkeeper made him the patron saint of scholars, which in turn led to festive plays where children entered the bishop’s throne for one day – in cities of the late medieval Hanse, noble families competed about whose son was appointed as child-bishop. While the Protestant reformers were skeptical of such practices of popular piety and of the invocation of the saints, they held the bishop Nicholas as exemplary benefactor in high esteem (cf. Luther’s “Sermon on St Nicholas,” 1519, WA 9:430). In modern times, Nicholas’s image was secularized as corpulent and red-nosed “Santa Claus.” Paradoxically, he was also degraded as a saint of the Roman Catholic church: since Vatican II, his veneration is no longer prescribed as a pious practice, given the scarce historical founda-

tion of his figure. However, precisely this fluidity may exactly be the reason why Nicholas was such a “productive” saint who kept triggering new imaginations of inner-worldly sanctity for more than 1,500 years.

**Bibliography. Primary:** ■ Anrich, G., *Hagios Nikolaos: Der heilige Nikolaos in der griechischen Kirche: Texte und Untersuchungen*, 2 vols. (Leipzig/Berlin 1913/17). ■ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints 1–2* (trans. G. Ryan; Princeton, NJ 1993). ■ Ševčenko, I./N. P. Ševčenko (ed./trans.), *The Life of Saint Nicholas of Sion* (Brookline, MA 1984). **Secondary:** ■ Cioffari, G., *Saint Nicholas: His Life, Miracles and Legends* (trans. V. Sportelli; Bari 2008). ■ English, A. C., *The Saint Who Would Be Santa Claus: The True Life and Trials of Nicholas of Myra* (Waco, TX 2012). ■ Gemeinhardt, P., “Wanderungen eines Heiligen: Gestalt und Legende des Nikolaus in der byzantinischen, mittelalterlichen und reformatorischen Hagiographie,” in *Neue Perspektiven auf den Nikolaus* (ed. M. Lissek et al.; JThF 33; Münster 2019) 9–37. ■ Hayes, D. M., “The Cult of St Nicholas of Myra in Norman Bari, c. 1071–c. 1111,” *JEH* 67 (2016) 492–516. ■ Heiser, L., *Nikolaus von Myra: Heiliger der ungeteilten Christenheit* (Sophia 18; Trier 1978). ■ Jones, C. W., *Saint Nicholas of Myra, Bari, and Manhattan: Biography of a Legend* (Chicago, IL 1978). ■ Mezger, W., *Sankt Nikolaus: Zwischen Kult und Klamauk: Zur Entstehung, Entwicklung und Veränderung der Brauchformen um einen populären Heiligen* (Ostfildern 1993). ■ Ševčenko, N. P., *The Life of Saint Nicholas in Byzantine Art* (Turin 1983). ■ Skambraks, T., *Das Kinderbischöfifest im Mittelalter* (Florence 2014).

Peter Gemeinhardt

See also → Myra

## Nicknames and Epithets

→ Names, Naming (People)

## Nicodemus

- I. New Testament
- II. Christianity
- III. Literature
- IV. Visual Arts
- V. Music
- VI. Film

### I. New Testament

Nicodemus is a literary figure mentioned only in the Gospel of John, where he appears in three scenes. He is Jesus’s counterpart in his first revelatory dialogue (John 3:1–10). Then he speaks in favor of Jesus in the discussions of the Sanhedrin (John 7:50–51). Finally, he contributes to Jesus’s royal burial (John 19:38–39). In all three scenes, his characterization is not without ambivalence, and it has been debated whether or not there is a development of this figure toward an open confession of faith. He is presented as a Jewish leader in Jerusalem, probably a member of the Sanhedrin, a Pharisee (John 3:1), prominent teacher (3:10) advanced in

years (3:4), and with considerable wealth (19:39). He approaches Jesus at night for a private conversation without any witnesses around, addresses him with high self-confidence and sympathy (John 3:2), but upon Jesus's reply (3:3), he is caught in misunderstanding (3:4) and Jesus finally rebukes his inability to understand (3:10). In the literary context, Nicodemus is introduced as an example of those humans to whom Jesus does not entrust himself (John 2:25), and the breaks in the conversation can be understood as a literary device which shows the gap between human understanding and Jesus's revelation. The following discourse (John 3:11–21) is addressed not to Nicodemus but rather to the readers who are expected to better understand the sending of Jesus. In John 7:50–51 Nicodemus defends Jesus against his colleagues in the Sanhedrin and pleads for a lawful procedure, only to be accused of being himself a secret follower of Jesus, but since there is no open confession, Nicodemus instead appears as one of the secret believers from the Jews (12:42). When he joins Joseph of Arimathea in the burial of Jesus, the question remains whether caring for Jesus's corpse is a sign of improper understanding, or, instead, an act of love and a silent confession of Jesus as a true king.

The ambiguities are not resolved in the Johannine text. Only in later Christian legend is Nicodemus considered a chief witness of a Jewish leader who became a supporter of Jesus and his followers (Gospel of Nicodemus), was baptized by Peter and John, deprived of his office by the chief priests, beaten almost to death, and later buried together with Stephen (Acts 6–7) and Gamaliel (Acts 5:34) in Gamaliel's own tomb (thus in the medieval *Golden Legend*, see Benz: 410).

Any attempt to link the literary figure with a known historical figure must remain uncertain. The Greek form of the name Νικόδημος is not common among Jews (Bauckham: 17). The rabbinic tradition (bGit 56a; bTaan 19b–20a) knows of a wealthy Jerusalemite of the period of the Jewish War, Naqdimon b. Gurion (= Buni), but the identification of the councilor of Jesus's time with this influential figure forty years later is chronologically improbable. The idea that John's Nicodemus was his grandfather (Robinson: 284–87) or uncle (Bauckham: 34) is mere speculation. Rabbinical testimonies and Josephus suggest that there was a wealthy family in Jerusalem in which the names Naqdimon and Gurion appeared several times. Does the evangelist know something about these families which leads him to introduce Jesus's interlocutor with this name, or can he draw on an older tradition? If he introduced the name of this character fictitiously, he would have fashioned it with good knowledge of the conditions in the Jewish aristocracy of Jerusalem. For reading the gospel text, the question of the historical reference of the figure remains of secondary im-

portance. Instead, it is the literary ambivalence of the figure that has stimulated readers up to the present to create their own image of Nicodemus.

**Bibliography:** ■ Bauckham, R., "Nicodemus and the Gurion Family," *JTS* 47.1 (1996) 1–37. ■ Bennema, C., *Encountering Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN 2014). [Esp. 147–60] ■ Benz, R. (ed.), *Die Legenda Aurea des Jacobus de Voragine* (Gütersloh 1999). ■ Culpepper, R. A., "Nicodemus: The Travail of New Birth," in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (ed. S. A. Hunt et al.; Tübingen 2013) 249–59. ■ Renz, G., "Nicodemus: An Ambiguous Disciple?" in *Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John* (ed. J. Lierman; Tübingen 2006) 255–81. ■ Robinson, J. A. T., *The Priority of John* (London 1985).

Jörg Frey

## II. Christianity

From the passages in John where Nicodemus figures, it appears that he was learned (John 3:1–12, 21), a man of position (7:50–52), and of considerable wealth (19:38–42). In all three cases he further seems to have taken positive action towards Jesus on his own initiative. He has nevertheless always been seen as, in some respect, deficient. In Christian reception history, opinion has varied greatly, however, as to the nature and the possible healing of this deficiency.

While Theodore of Mopsuestia stripped Nicodemus of individuality and made him represent humanity in general, doomed to decay and corruption, John Chrysostom and Augustine included more specific traits. Chrysostom was overwhelmingly negative: Nicodemus was in need of a total renewal, such as takes place in baptism. Chrysostom found that though he developed positively, to the end Nicodemus thought of the Lord in purely human terms.

Although Augustine understood Nicodemus as proud and timid, he also interpreted Nicodemus's first encounter with Jesus as confirmation of his faith. Augustine likened him to a believing catechumen, awaiting, but still lacking, rebirth in baptism. Commenting on John 19, Augustine assumed that Nicodemus in the meantime had been coming regularly to Jesus in order to become a disciple, and believed this to be confirmed by the then recent finding of his relics (415 AD). Based on a similar belief, Nicodemus was early listed as apostle in the Eastern tradition.

Medieval popular reception of Nicodemus came to be centered on belief in his martyrdom and sainthood. Soon after his relics were found, the *Acta Pilati* had appeared, later to be included in the apocryphal but enormously popular Gospel of Nicodemus. Here he clearly moves from doubt to faith. This gospel boosted his sainthood and gave him a prominent place in church and culture. This survived the decision of the council of Trent to put the Gospel of Nicodemus on index; he figures in *Martyrologium Romanum* with August 3rd as his day of commemoration.

As John 3 was included in protestant lectionaries for the feast of *Trinitatis*, the Nicodemus of that dialogue was for centuries secured attention in Protestantism. In his 1526 *Trinitatis* sermon (WA 10.1.2) Luther portrayed Nicodemus as pious, wise and just, one of the best of people. This, on the other hand, was of no avail *coram Deo*. Even the best among us remain flesh and can neither see nor enter the kingdom of God, other than in faith – as reborn by the Holy Spirit in baptism. Calvin largely concurred with Luther, but where Luther's logic made his negative verdict absolute, Calvin noted a “seed” of faith in Nicodemus. This implied a possibility for growth which was foreign to Luther, and though not developed by Calvin himself, the idea of growth came to flourish in later centuries.

The broad Baptist tradition saw no reference to Christian baptism in John 3, a view which later came to influence Protestantism in general. The presbyterian covenanter George Hutcheson saw the water in John 3:5 as a symbol for spiritual realities, as did later evangelical revivalists: Nicodemus's deficiency and cure were spiritualized in tandem. To August Herman Francke and John Wesley his name had become a byword for cowardly “fearing man,” and the required rebirth was identical with a conversion of heart and mind – “Salvation is an inside job,” as many internet sermons on John 3 are entitled. At the outset this “job” was seen as a miraculous intervention by the Holy Spirit, more recently often conceived of in growth categories, typically under brotherly or pastoral counseling – like that which Nicodemus was thought to have experienced.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, reception of Nicodemus was influenced by historical and form critical scholarship of the Bible. In 1968, for example, J. Louis Martyn proposed a historical reconstruction of the community where the Fourth Gospel originated, and interpreted Nicodemus as a symbolic figure representing secret believers in that community, or believers with a split allegiance to church and synagogue. In the wake of the literary turn in biblical reception, other scholars replaced the historical Nicodemus with the “textual Nicodemus,” often emphasizing the importance of irony to any accounts of Nicodemus. Interpreting irony as a matter of reception (rather than an objective characteristic of texts), T. S. Dokka, for example, argued that Nicodemus's ambiguous incomprehension, unwittingly witnesses to the fundamental ironies of Johannine Christology – that non-reception demonstrates Jesus's non-worldly origin, and of Johannine soteriology – that rebirth/salvation is as impossible for humans as it is to enter one's mother's womb anew.

**Bibliography:** ■ Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 11–27, vol. 2 of id., *Tractates on the Gospel of John* (FC 79; Washington DC 1988). ■ Calvin, J., *Auslegung des Johannes-Evangeliums* (trans. M. Trebesius/H. C. Petersen; Neukirchen-Vluyn 1964). ■ Dokka, T. S., “Irony and Sectarianism in the Gos-

pel of John,” in *New Readings of John* (ed. J. Nissen/S. Pedersen; JSNT 182; Sheffield 1999). ■ Francke, A. H., *Nicodemus: Or, the Fear of Man* (Bristol 51767). ■ Hutcheson, G., *Exposition of the Gospel of Jesus Christ According to John* (Edinburgh 1657). ■ John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist: Homilies 1–47*, vol. 1 of id., *Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist* (FC 33; Washington, DC 1969). ■ Martyn, J. L., *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (New York 1968). ■ Theodor of Mopsuestia, *Katechetische Homilien*, vol. 2 (trans. P. Bruns; Freiburg i.Br. 1995).

Trond Skard Dokka

### III. Literature

In literary reception Nicodemus is portrayed in very different ways, for example, as a Jew who sympathizes with Jesus but wavered, as a Jew committed to Jesus, as a prominent rabbi, as a Christian believer, as a man (or human being) who does not want to be born again but longs for death.

All three scenes in which Nicodemus figures in the Gospel of John – Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night (John 3:1–10), Nicodemus interceding for Jesus in the temple before the Pharisees on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles (7:50–52), Nicodemus's bringing of myrrh mixed with aloes for the burial of Jesus (19:39) – are received in literature, whether separately or in connection with each other or linked to other Johannine motifs.

To the biblical portrait of Nicodemus the legendary reception of the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine (13th cent.; see “*Legenda aurea*”) adds further elements. Although Nicodemus is not given a separate section here, he is mentioned in various chapters that show a close connection between him, Stephen, and Gamaliel. In “*Saint Stephen*” (ch. 8) it is told that Nicodemus together with Gamaliel “buried him [sc. St. Stephen] in a plot of land that belonged to Gamaliel” (Voragine: 1:48; cf. Benz: 48). In “*The Finding of Saint Stephen, the First Martyr*” (ch. 112) Gamaliel, now deceased, appears to the presbyter Lucianus in a vision, reporting that Nicodemus, “who received sacred baptism from Peter and John,” is his nephew, lying with him in the same tomb “at Saint Stephen's feet” (Voragine: 2:40; cf. Benz: 410). In “*The Resurrection of the Lord*” (ch. 54), Nicodemus is presented as the author and one of the characters of “*the Gospel of Nicodemus*” who together with Gamaliel (and others) asks the risen sons of Simeon what Christ did in hell (Voragine: 1:222; cf. Benz: 217). In “*The Exaltation of the Holy Cross*” (ch. 137) Nicodemus is depicted as the painter of a picture showing Jesus crucified. At his death Nicodemus bequeathed it to Gamaliel who will pass it on to further generations. The miraculous picture causes Jews to believe in Jesus as the Messiah and be baptized (Voragine: 2:171; cf. Benz: 540).

Henry Vaughan (1621–1695), one of the English metaphysical poets influenced by George Herbert (1593–1633), takes up the nocturnal encounter be-

tween Nicodemus and Jesus in his poem “The Night” (1655) from the poetry collection *Silex Scintillans* (1650/55) and links it to the Johannine idea of Jesus as light (John 1:5; 3:19; 8:12): “Wise Nicodemus saw such light/ As made him know his God by night” (vv. 5–6; Martz: 395). Nicodemus is not portrayed as a questioning Pharisee but as one who recognizes God as Jesus Christ when “Did at midnight speak with the Sun!” (v. 12; Martz: 396). The lyrical first-person voice therefore understands Nicodemus as a blessed one: “Most blest believer he!” (v. 7; Martz: 396). The poem keeps open the possibility that Nicodemus might have been among the disciples to whom the risen Jesus appeared (cf. Clements: 134). Nicodemus becomes a role model for those who do not have the opportunity to meet Jesus physically: like Nicodemus, they are to meet God during the stillness and darkness “of the literal night time” in which “one may come closer to God through prayer and love” (Clements: 132–33).

In Hallgrímur Pétursson’s (1614–1674) *Passíusálmar* (written 1656–59; first published 1666; *Passion Hymns*; sung to this day in every Icelandic house; cf. Klose: XXI–XXV), a cycle of fifty poems which rhyme the entire passion narrative of Jesus by interweaving of all four gospels, Nicodemus appears together with Joseph of Arimathea in the forty-ninth Sálmur (hymn/psalm) titled as “Um Kristi greftran”/ “About Christ’s Burial” (Pétursson: 237–40; Klose: 223–26; trans. author). Unlike John 19:39, the psalm does not mention that Nicodemus is the one who came to Jesus in the night, but focuses on mentioning the gifts of myrrh and aloe for Jesus’s burial: “Jósef fík strax af krossi Krist,/ keypti þó nýjan Índúk fyrst./ Nikódemus kom þegar þar,/ pangao kostuleg smyrslin þar” (Pétursson: 237; “Immediately Joseph took from the cross/ Jesus, wrap him in soft linen;/ Nicodemus also came,/ he brought aloe and fine myrrh”; trans. author).

While Nicodemus was obviously of little interest in the literary reception of the 18th century (cf. Jeffrey: 550), there are interesting examples of reception in the 19th to 21st centuries:

Conrad Ferdinand Meyer’s (1825–1898) poem “In einer Sturmnacht” (1887, “On a Stormy Night”; trans. author) combines, like Vaughan’s “The Night,” the Johannine motifs of night and light and plays with the double meaning of the Greek lexeme πνεῦμα (wind, spirit). A hanging lamp suspended from brass chains reminds the lyrical I-narrator of the wind-blown light that “einst geglommen für ein nächtlich Paar,/ Ein greises und ein göttlich Angesicht” (v. 14; Meyer: 1:259; “once glowed for a nocturnal couple/ An old and a divine face”; trans. author). Insofar as “lamp” in Meyer’s poetry is also a symbol for life (cf. Meyer: 4:345), the poem links another central motif of Johannine Christology with the reception of Nicodemus who is addressed directly by Jesus, the “Friedestifter” (v. 17; “peace-

maker”): “Hörst, Nikodeme, du den Schöpfer Geist,/ Der mächtig weht und seine Welt erneut?” (vv. 19–20; Meyer: 1:259; “Do you hear, Nicodemus, the Creator Spirit blowing mightily and renewing his world?”; trans. author). Addressing the motif of “Völkerfrieden” (cf. Meyer: 4:344), the poem is not about the rebirth of the individual like John 3:1–10, but the hoped-for peace among peoples and nations as God’s new creation of the world.

In the Polish-born Yiddish novelist, playwright, and essayist Sholem Asch’s (1880–1957) novel *The Nazarene* (1939), Nicodemus, called “Nicodemon,” “figures prominently as a faithful rabbi” (Jeffrey: 550). In Dorothy L. Sayers’s (1893–1957) play cycle *The Man Born To Be King* (1943), a series of twelve plays on the life of Jesus, Nicodemus is present on stage in the fourth, sixth, seventh, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth plays. In her notes on the characters, Sayers describes Nicodemus as ambiguous, following Jesus in secret: “The decent man with sufficient courage to state his opinions, but not the temperament that embraces martyrdom for them” (Sayers: 160). Although he is the one who always stands up for Jesus and, for example, in the discussion about Jesus’s controversial temple saying, critically asks: “Did he say he *would* destroy or only that he *could*?” (Sayers: 273), he dares not openly break with the religious authorities. This is particularly evident at the end of the play: with the words “We have slain the Lord’s anointed! He has risen in vengeance” Nicodemus collapses (Sayers: 332).

The Russian-German poet, painter, and doctor Vladimir Lindenberg (1902–1997) from the old Russian noble family of the Chelishchevs (Kasack: 18–23), survivor of a three-year imprisonment in the Nazi concentration camp Neustamm (Kasack: 109–14), connects John 3:2 with John 19:38–39 in the third part of his novel-like autobiography entitled *Bobik in der Fremde* (1971, *Bobik abroad*). Bobik, a young Russian in exile, medical student in Bonn, and painter of events of the life of Jesus, creates a triptych whose central part depicts Jesus’s descent from the cross. Nicodemus, present in the painted scene, is characterized as a “Partner stiller, einsamer Gespräche” (Lindenberg: 160; “partner in quiet, lonely dialogues”; trans. author). While Bobik is painting, he remembers a conversation he heard as a child, in which his mother represented a very special view of the resurrection of Jesus: With the help of Nicodemus, the doctor Joseph of Arimathea brought Jesus back to life, “der in Todesstarre war und seinen Geist aufgegeben hatte” (Lindenberg: 162; “who was in rigor mortis and had given up his ghost”; trans. author).

Alluding to the question ventilated in the history of interpretation whether Nicodemus came to Jesus at night out of fear of the Jews, the Russian-Jewish American poet Howard Nemerov (1920–

1991), winner of the National Book Award of Poetry and the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1978, considers in his poem “Nicodemus” from the poetic cycle *Guide to the Ruins* (1950) whether it is desirable to be born again. In a vague crossfade between the biblical character Nicodemus and an old man of the present day, he puts the question of John 3:4 into the mouth of the poem’s male lyrical first-person voice: “Rabbi, I said/ How is a man born, being old?” (vv. 12–13; Nemerov: 55). The self-given answer is: “Rabbi, all things in the springtime/ Flower again, but a man may not/ Flower again” (vv. 33–35; *ibid.*: 55). Demonstrating the distress of childhood, the lyrical Nicodemus confesses: “I would not, if I could, be born again/ To suffer the miseries of the child” (vv. 8–9; *ibid.*: 55). Taking up the typical Johannine motif of the “hour” (ὥρα; cf. John 2:4; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1), he rather explains: “Now the end of my desire is death/ For my hour is almost come” (vv. 45–46; Nemerov: 56).

As with Sayers, Nicodemus is also a major speaking role in the libretto of the *Oberammergau Passion Play 2022*, using older play texts, but extensively edited and expanded by the German theater director Christian Stückl (born 1961 in Oberammergau). Also as with Sayers, neither the conversation at night nor Nicodemus’s participation in the burial are brought to the stage. Unlike with Sayers, however, Nicodemus is here, deepening John 7:50–52, a staunch supporter of Jesus from beginning to end, openly coming out as one of his followers. In the inner-Jewish dissent staged by Stückl between the followers of Caiaphas and the followers of Jesus, it is Nicodemus who already exclaims during the “Interrogation before Annas and the High Council” (Stückl: 74–88): “Caiaphas, let go off this man!” (Stückl: 82), and finally in the scene “Sentencing of Jesus by Pilate” (Stückl: 114–27) demands: “Pilate, release Jesus, he is without guilt” (Stückl: 121). With these clear words, Nicodemus leaves the stage.

**Bibliography. Primary:** ■ Asch, S., *The Nazarene* (New York 1939). ■ Atwan, R. et al., *Divine Inspiration: The Life of Jesus in World Poetry* (New York 1998). ■ Benz, R. (trans.), *Die Legenda aurea des Jacobus de Voragine* (Gütersloh 162014). ■ Klose, W. (trans.), *Die Passionspsalmen des Isländischen Dichters Hallgrímur Pétursson 1614–1674 unter Beibehaltung der Dichtungsform des Originals in deutscher Sprache wiedergegeben* (Reykjavik 1974). ■ Lindenberg, W., *Bobik in der Fremde: Ein junger Russe in der Emigration* (Munich 1971). ■ Martz, L., *George Herbert and Henry Vaughan* (Oxford 1986). ■ Meyer, C. F., *Sämtliche Werke: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, 15 vols. (ed. H. Zeller/A. Zäch; Bern 1958–96). ■ Nemerov, H., *The Collected Poems of Howard Nemerov* (Chicago, IL 1977). ■ Pétursson, H., *Fimmtíu Passíusúlmar* [Fifty Passion Hymns] (Reykjavik 1980). ■ Sayers, D. L., *The Man Born To Be King: A Play-Cycle on the Life of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (London 1966). ■ Stückl, C., *Passion Play Oberammergau 2022: Textbook* (Oberammergau 2022). ■ Voragine, J. de, *The Golden Legend: Reading on the Saints*, 2 vols. (trans. W. G. Ryan; Princeton, NY 1993).

**Secondary:** ■ Bocian, M., *Lexikon der biblischen Personen* (Stuttgart 2004). ■ Clements, A. L., *Poetry of Contemplation: John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, and the Modern Period* (New York 1990). ■ Jeffrey, D. L. (ed.), *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI 1992). ■ Kasack, W., *Schicksal und Gestaltung: Leben und Werk Wladimir Lindbergs* (Munich 1987).

Christina Hoegen-Rohls

#### IV. Visual Arts

New Testament references to Nicodemus are found only in the Gospel of John. He first appears in John 3:1–21, where John describes Nicodemus’s nocturnal visit to see Jesus in order to learn more about his miracles and the reasons for his coming. An educational conversation follows. This event is never depicted in early Christian art, and remained rare in medieval art (14th. cent., Athos, Mone Megiste Laura, Cod. A 76, fol. 71v, [bottom]). In more recent art, however, examples become much more common (Rembrandt, *Jesus and Nicodemus*, pen and wash, ca. 1660, Museum Boijmans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Nikolaj Nikolajewitsch Ge, *Christ and Nicodemus*, oil on canvas, 1889, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow). The scene always presents Jesus and Nicodemus in conversation, either standing or seated. Other people usually surround the two central figures, but they can also appear alone (Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, *Picture Bible*, 1860). Despite the importance of the subject of Jesus’s and Nicodemus’s conversation, artists seldom illustrated this scene, perhaps because it proved difficult to depict visually.

John also mentions Nicodemus in 19:38–42, describing his participation in the deposition of Jesus: Nicodemus comes to the cross with Joseph of Arimathea bringing costly myrrh and aloë. The two men lift Jesus down from the cross, wrap him in linen, and lay him in a new grave in a nearby garden.

Like the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, depictions of the deposition first appear in the Middle Ages in both Western (Codex Egberti 977–93, Trier, Stadtbibliothek, MS 24, fol. 85v) and Eastern art (Sermons and Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus, 879–882, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Par. gr. 510, fol. 30v). John and Mary usually flank the scene of two men removing Jesus’s body from the cross. One uses pliers to remove the nails while the other receives the body, usually laying it over his shoulder. Other figures also sometimes observe the scene. Tituli found in some images clearly identify the first man as Nicodemus and the second as Joseph of Arimathea.

This basic formula appears in multiple variations. Some images depict the nails being pulled only from Jesus’s hands (triptych ivory, 2nd half of the 10th cent., Dumbarton Oaks Collection, Washington, DC; triptych ivory, 12th cent., Dommuseum, Hildesheim; fresco, 1st decade of the 13th

cent., St. Jakob, Soles; with tituli: book painting, 1178, Parma Cathedral [by B. Antelami]), while in others the nails are pulled from both his hands and his feet (11th cent., Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, Cod. 5, fol. 90r; fresco, ca. 1210, castle chapel of St. Katharina, Hocheppan). In the latter case, it is no longer clear which of the two men removing nails is Nicodemus. In other cases, another person helps Joseph, represented with a halo, remove the body from the cross (Duccio, *Maestà*, altarpiece from Siena Cathedral, 1308–11, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena); Fra Angelico used the same formula for his version of the scene (tempera, 1437–40, Museo di San Marco, Florence), although he presents both Joseph and Nicodemus with halos. In Rembrandt's depiction of the scene (*Descent from the Cross*, oil on panel, ca. 1633, Alte Pinakothek, Munich), by contrast, five people are involved in the deposition. Especially in some cases from the late-medieval times onwards, a ladder is used in the descent from the cross (an earlier example: *Melisende Psalter*, ca. 1140, London, British Library, MS Egerton 1139, fol. 8v).

The lamentation of Jesus (*threnos*), not mentioned in the Bible, follows the descent from the cross. This pictorial subject is found quite frequently in Byzantine art, and in Western art primarily in the period between the 14th and the 16th centuries. The original composition was essentially the same in both the East and the West (fresco, 1164, Church of St. Panteleimon, Gorno Nerezi; Giotto, fresco, after 1303, Arena Chapel, Padua): the deceased lies in the foreground, and Mary often holds her son's head while John mourns. Joseph and Nicodemus sometimes appear at Jesus's feet (Giotto depicts them standing [see → plate 5], in Nerezi they kneel). The older of the two is principally identified as Joseph, the younger as Nicodemus. In later Western images the scene is often placed in an open landscape, and the act of mourning loses some of its significance (Vittore Carpaccio, *The Dead Christ*, oil on canvas, 1510, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin).

Finally, Nicodemus appears a fourth time in relation to the burial of Jesus, although his presence is only mentioned in John (19:38–42) but not in Matthew (27:57–60). Like the other events, the earliest images of the burial of Jesus date to the Middle Ages in both Western (Codex Egberti, fol. 85v [see above]) and Eastern art (Sermons and Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus, fol. 30v [see above]). In both the Codex Egberti and the Khludov Psalter (9th cent., Moscow, State Historical Museum, Cod. 129, fol. 87r), the two protagonists, depeiced alone, are identified by tituli. The Western image closely follows the biblical account, identifying the area around the grave as a “garden” (*hortus*), while the Byzantine image diverges from it, depicting the location of the grave as a cave (a motif that enjoys high popularity in Eastern art overall). Mary is also

sometimes present at the burial (ivory triptych, early 10th cent., Munich, Staatsbibliothek, Cod. lat. 6381, Cim. 181; fresco, 1st half of the 11th cent., Katholikon, Hosios Loukas; fresco, 1072–87, San Angelo in Formis, Capua), as are other women and John (Duccio [see above]; Fra Angelico [see above]). In still other scenes, tituli identify John, Nicodemus, and Joseph (ivory tablet, 10th cent., Hermitage, St. Petersburg). In the Phorbiotissa church in Asinou (1105/6), John is identified by a *nomen sacrum*, while another haloed figure at Jesus's feet, who could be either Nicodemus or Joseph, cannot be definitively identified.

Treatment of the subject becomes freer in the Early Modern period (Passions-Altar, tempera, Hans Holbein the Younger, 1516–26, Kunstmuseum, Basel; oil on canvas, Titian, *The Entombment*, ca. 1566, Museo del Prado, Madrid; Rembrandt, *The Entombment*, oil ca. 1639, Hunterian Museum, Glasgow).

In medieval art, the deposition and burial are sometimes combined in one image (Codex Egberti, fol. 85v [see above]; Sermons and Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus, fol. 30v [see above]).

*Michael Altripp*

## V. Music

Since Nicodemus is mentioned in John 19:38–42 together with Joseph of Arimathea for their role in the burial of Jesus, they both figure in oratorio passions (see “Oratorio” and “Passion of Jesus VII. Music”) which include the burial of Jesus, as does J. S. Bach's *St. John Passion* (1724 with several later revisions; Marissen: 127). Further, in a *sepolcro* by Johann Joseph Fux, *La deposizione dalla croce* (1728; *The Deposition from the Cross*), both Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea have substantial roles together with Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and the disciple John, expanding on John 19:38–42. The *sepolcro* was performed in front of a replica of the Holy Sepulcher in the imperial chapel (the Hofburg Kapelle) in Vienna on Tuesday of Holy Week 1728 (White). Nicodemus (sung by a bass) and Joseph (sung by a tenor) are believers in Jesus, although the entire drama evolves before the resurrection. Nicodemus sings several recitatives and two arias, one in each of the two parts, the first taking place during the deposition, the second after the burial of Jesus. In a recitative and dramatic aria in the first part, he shows his anger about the cruelty against Jesus, expressed, however, in a general accusation against Zion. In his second aria (in the second part), he bewails his own sinfulness (Pasquini).

The beginning of the episode where Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, John 3:1–10, is referenced in Bach's cantata BWV 176, *Es ist ein trotzig und verzagt Ding* (1725; “There is something stubborn and fainthearted”) for Trinity Sunday (Stokes: 275–76) to a libretto (mainly) written by a female poet,

Christiane Mariane von Ziegler. The opening chorus of the cantata sets the first sentence of Jer 17:9. The text of the following recitative for the alto takes the cue from here, speaking of Nicodemus and his nightly visit to Jesus: “Truly fainthearted, I mean/ That Nicodemus did not dare by day,/ But by night to approach Jesus” (Ich meine, recht verzagt,/ Daß Nikodemus sich bei Tage nicht,/ Bei Nacht zu Jesus wagt; Stokes: 275). However, in the following soprano aria and bass recitative, Nicodemus speaks, paraphrasing and expanding his words in John 3:2, expressing his fear, but also his belief that Jesus comes from God. His words are answered in a generally comforting way, referencing the evangelical message of salvation through faith, before a chorale (to a text by Paul Gerhardt) concludes the cantata.

Further, G. P. Telemann’s cantata *Drei sind, die da zeugen im Himmel* (1711; There are Three that Testify in Heaven; cf. 1 John 5:7) briefly (and critically) references Nicodemus’s question to Jesus in John 3:4 (*Bach Cantatas Website*, q.v. “Telemann” and “Nicodemus”).

There seems otherwise to be little reception in music of the biblical figure Nicodemus. German composer Volker Wangerheim (1928–2014) wrote a choral composition, *Nicodemus Jesum nocte visitat* (1968–74; Nicodemus Visits Jesus at Night) for voices and orchestra (Lück). Ernst Pepping and Hermann Reutter wrote gospel motets (Schipperges: 221), respectively *Jesus und Nikodemus* (1938) and *Jesu Nachtgespräch mit Nikodemus* (1985; Jesus’s Nightly Conversation with Nicodemus).

Searching *Hymnary.com*, one finds a few hymns, all written after 1800, based on John 3:1–10. Among them are “Hos dig, o Jesus, sent om nat” (To You, O Jesus, Late at Night) by Norwegian Lutheran minister and poet Magnus B. Landstad (1802–1880) and “He Came in the Hush of the Silent Night” by American church minister William Orcutt Cushing (1823–1903).

**Bibliography:** ■ Bach, J. S., *Es ist ein trotzig und verzagt Ding* (Cantata BWV 176; Leipzig 1725). ■ Cushing, W., “He Came in the Hush of the Silent Night,” *Hymnary.org: A Comprehensive Index of Hymns and Hymnals* ([www.hymnary.org](http://www.hymnary.org)). ■ Fux, J. J., *La Depositione dalla Croce (sepolcro)*; text G. C. Pasquini; Vienna 1728). ■ Landstad, M. B., “Hos dig, o Jesus, sent om nat,” *Hymnary.org: A Comprehensive Index of Hymns and Hymnals* ([www.hymnary.org](http://www.hymnary.org)). ■ *Bach Cantatas Website* ([www.bach-cantatas.com](http://www.bach-cantatas.com)). ■ Lück, R., “Wangerheim, Volker,” *Grove Music Online* ([www.oxfordmusiconline.com](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com)). ■ Marissen, M., *Bach’s Oratorios: The Parallel German-English Texts with Annotations* (Oxford 2008). ■ Pasquini, C., *La deposizione dalla croce di Gesù Cristo salvator nostro* (booklet for audio recording of Johann Joseph Fux’s *La deposizione dalla croce* conducted by M. Haselböck; Novalis 150089–2; Zurich 1992). ■ Schipperges, T., *Musik und Bibel*, vol. 2 (Kassel 2009). ■ Stokes, R. J. S. *Bach: The Complete Cantatas* (Lanham, MD 2004). ■ White, H., “La deposizione dalla croce di Gesù Cristo salvator nostro: An Introduction,” in booklet for audio recording of Johann Joseph Fux’s *La deposizione dalla croce*

conducted by M. Haselböck (Novalis 150089–2; Zurich 1992) n.p.

Nils Holger Petersen

## VI. Film

The three appearances of Nicodemus in the Gospel of John – having a nighttime discussion with Jesus (3:1–21), arguing briefly to the Sanhedrin against jumping too quickly to find Jesus guilty of anything without hearing his own testimony (7:50–52), and bringing spices and myrrh to assist Joseph of Arimathea to prepare the body of Jesus for burial (19:39–42) – are represented in films, usually embedded within the larger narrative of Jesus and those around him and sometimes including details drawn from outside of the text of John or even from outside the Bible.

Perhaps the most sweeping epic, *Jesus of Nazareth*, a 1977 British-Italian production directed by Franco Zeffirelli starring Robert Powell (with his startling blue eyes) as Jesus and Laurence Olivier as Nicodemus, was made as a television miniseries. It encompasses expansive biblical and occasional non-biblical elements. It begins with the betrothal of Mary and Joseph and the annunciation, includes myriad details from across the Gospels and beyond, and ends with the crucifixion and resurrection – where a non-biblical character, Zerach, gets the last word, observing, as he and his colleagues stare into the empty tomb, that “Now it begins.” Nicodemus appears in all three of his Johannine moments, but the movie expands the last of these: looking in despair up at the crucified Jesus, Nicodemus utters words from Isa 53:3–5 regarding the suffering servant.

A generation later, by contrast, the full-length movie *The Gospel of John* – a 2003 epic (GB/CA/US) directed by Philip Saville, with Henry Ian Cusick as Jesus and Diego Matamoros as Nicodemus – limits its narrative to a detailed, chapter-by-chapter, verse-by-verse depiction of the Fourth Gospel (although chs. 17–21 are treated as one chapter). It intersperses passages from the text itself with verses and framing comments provided by the narrator. Offering reenactments that are said to be faithful, it offers some inclusions – such as Mary Magdalene’s presence at the Last Supper – that are not explicitly in the text but that, the filmmakers argue, are implied by it. The filmmakers claim to be guiding the viewer to recognize those implications in the text. The scenes with Nicodemus are particularly effective, most particularly the visit to Jesus at night and the intense dialogue between the two.

*The Chosen* is another a made-for-television series that includes the character Nicodemus. A hugely successful crowd-funding campaign, inspired by a 2017 pilot, raised the capital for VidAngel Studios (USA) to begin producing a planned seven-year series, each year with a discreet progression of epi-



sodes. The first episode was released in April 2019. It was directed and co-written by Dallas Jenkins, who, in introducing the series, asserts that, while the script is scrupulously loyal to the biblical narrative, it nonetheless creates material not in the text to help the viewer more fully understand the (distinctly evangelizing) intentions of its explicit words.

This is already apparent in the first episode, as its very title, "I Have Called You By Name," is ostensibly based on Luke 8:2 and Mark 16:9, although the moment of Mary's being called and cured at the hands of Jesus (played by Jonathan Roumie) comes only at the end of the episode. After the teaser, the episode begins with Nicodemus, played by Erick Avari, as the preeminent Pharisaic leader. He is shown coming to Capernaum (a journey that will not be found in the Gospels) where, after an interaction with the Roman magistrate, he attempts, and fails, to drive demons out of a woman who is only recognized at the end of the episode by Jesus, in his first real appearance, to be Mary of Magdala. Nicodemus plays an outsized role throughout the episode and throughout the series – well beyond his biblical role in John. The second episode investigates the report of the miraculous cure of Mary; in episode five, he interrogates John the Baptizer – and in episode seven, finally, interwoven with other narrative details, he meets and talks with Jesus at night – in Capernaum, however. The second season is still in production.

There are slight historical miscues in all three epics/series. Particularly in the first two, these resonate with a specific sensibility: finding the Jews responsible and the Romans innocent regarding the execution of Jesus. That sensibility is more emphatic in *Nicodemus: The Night Visitor* (produced by Eternity Media Productions Ltd, and with an uncredited director, a 2019 Australian quasi-documentary intended for a distinctly Christian audience. *Nicodemus: The Night Visitor* is one part of a larger series (not necessarily biblical in content, but consistently devoted to preparing viewers for the second coming), called *The Incredible Journey*. This is also the name for the company producing the films and their accompanying literature. With the script entirely provided by narration, both on and off camera, by Pastor Gary Kent, the storyline uses very effective silent recreations of the action, emphasizing Nicodemus in his three biblical appearances – the visit to Jesus is set in the garden of Gethsemane – framed by the larger contours of the Gospel story.

There are occasional other large-scale films devoted to the story of Jesus in which Nicodemus makes a briefer appearance, most notably the controversial 2004 film directed and co-written by Mel Gibson, *The Passion of the Christ* (USA), with Jim Caviezel in the eponymous lead role. Part of the film's controversy pertains to its synthesis of details not only from all four Gospels but also from extra-bibli-

cal Christian sources. Nicodemus's one appearance comes when he and Joseph of Arimathea are shown protesting that Jesus's trial has become a sham; Nicodemus (Aleksander Mincer) asserts that witnesses' testimonies are filled with contradictions.

There are films devoted to the Jesus narrative that skip over Nicodemus altogether (e.g., the various film versions of the Andrew Lloyd Weber/Tim Wilson musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*). Conversely, there is *The Gospel of Nicodemus* – but which is hardly a film, since it offers a narration over a still image of the crowd gathered at Golgotha that remains on the screen throughout the 82-minute reading – an apocryphal work, "formerly called the *Acts of Pontius Pilate*," as the opening line of the narration asserts. This account of essential parts of the Jesus narrative allegedly written by Nicodemus was, according to the narration read by C. J. Ploke, translated by Archbishop William Wake (1657–1737) from Greek and Latin, and was produced by Librivox. There is also the occasional film that uses the name of the biblical character with no biblical connection. In the Nigerian film *Nicodemus*, the eponymous antihero is a sometimes clever-talking ne'er-do-well with no moral compass: the implied biblical connection, if any, is that he survives thanks to the grace of God, whose name is glorified at the end of each of the two separate segments of the film.

**Bibliography:** ■ Burgess, A., *Man of Nazareth* (New York 1979). ■ Corley, K. E./R. L. Webb (eds.), *Jesus and Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ* (London 2004). ■ Farris, K. B., *Nicodemus: The Night Visitor* (Bloomington, IN 2010). ■ Merrick, J., "The Chosen' is a New and Promising TV Series on the Life of Christ," *National Catholic Register* (April 9, 2020; www.ncregister.com). ■ Moore, E. F., "The Chosen': Elgin Filmmaker Wants People to 'Binge Jesus' on an App," *Chicago Sun-Times* (March 18, 2020; www.chicago.sun-times.com). ■ Pollitt, K., "The Protocols of Mel Gibson," *The Nation* (March 11, 2004; www.thenation.com). ■ Sawyer, J. F. A., *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture* (Hoboken, NJ 2012). ■ Zeffirelli, F., *Franco Zeffirelli's Jesus: A Spiritual Diary* (New York 1984).

Ori Z. Soltes

## Nicodemus, Gospel of

The text known since the Middle Ages as the Gospel of Nicodemus comprises the *Acta Pilati*, the Story of Joseph of Arimathea, as well as the resurrection event and the *Descensus Christi ad Inferos*. The first reliable reference to the *Acta Pilati* is found around 375 in Epiphanius (*Pan.* 1.5, 8). In the western part of the empire, the text seems to have been known since the 6th century (Gregory of Tours, *Decem libris historiarum* 1.21). The *Descensus* may have been written as early as the 5th/6th century and added to the Acts of Pilate.

The Gospel of Nicodemus describes the passion and Easter events. After its prologue, the text opens with the accusation against Jesus by the chief priests