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Nicodemus

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Nicodemus occurs for the first time in John 3 as an old (γέρων) teacher (διδάσκαλος), coming from the Pharisaic party and intending to have a dialogue with Jesus by night. The reference to his leading function as an ἄρχων of the Jews, i.e., a lay member of the Sanhedrin, presupposes that he was aristocratic and wealthy. Thus, several attempts have been undertaken so far to link Nicodemus of John 3 to a historical person of the ruling elite in pre-70 Jerusalem called Naqdimon ben Gurion (גוריון בן נקודימון *Sifre Deut* 305) or a Jewish envoy with the same name mentioned by Josephus (Ant. 14:37; cf. J.W. 2:451). Bauckham 1996 has delivered the most well-studied historical investigation and argues that all these persons belonged to the same rich Jewish Gurion family. It seems quite likely that Nicodemus of the Fourth Gospel belonged to this family; however, we cannot be sure about his exact relationship to the Gurion family. In the Gospel of John, the next reference to Nicodemus's warning to the Jewish leaders against an improper condemnation of Jesus (John 7:50) confirms both his acquaintance with the Tora and his active membership in the Sanhedrin. In another place, John reports that some of the ἄρχοντες believed, but did not confess their faith in Christ because of the Pharisees, so as not to be excommunicated from the synagogue (12:42). There is much to suggest that Nicodemus belongs to this group. This does not mean, however, that he could not come to a public confession of his faith in Christ later. Thus, the final mention in John 19:39 regarding Nicodemus's action at Jesus's burial reveals his discipleship. His hundred-pound luxurious spices' donation demonstrates his bountiful love for Jesus and reflects a fabulous wealth that is also witnessed by the Rabbinic traditions about Naqdimon ben Gurion. It also symbolically integrates him into the close circle of Jesus's followers who enter into the "garden" (Kramp 2017: 280). Accordingly, in the course of the narrative, Nicodemus experiences a turn from rejecting Jesus's witness (3:11–12) to publicly

showing that he is a follower of Jesus (Whitenton 2019:72). His faith develops and opens him to more risk (Morgan 2015:407)

However, this interpretation is much disputed. This is due to the fact that, like in other cases, the author of the fourth Gospel whom we conventionally call John is moving on the margins between historical and symbolic reality. His perspective draws on the continuity between the two. Accordingly, it is not possible to sharply distinguish between Nicodemus as a historical person and a symbolic figure within the Gospel narrative (Culpepper 2013). It is entirely plausible that John refers to a wealthy member of the Gurion family that is mentioned in Josephus's historiographic work and Rabbinic sources. The identification of a Jesus's follower with such a renowned Jewish family would be very plausible for contemporary readers. But John's educated audience could also understand the multiple allusions of his name (reference to δῆμος, i.e. Jewish people), his words (question on rebirth and his warning), his actions, and the contexts where Nicodemus occurs in the Gospel's narrative (night, Sanhedrin, garden).

In John's time, readers with Hellenistic education would be able to uncover similarities between John 3 and traditions regarding Socrates as the wise old teacher (γέροντα καὶ διδάσκαλον, Athenaeus, *Deipn. Ep.* 2.1) or the typical image of the philosopher as a senior teacher who brings his interlocutors to ἀπορία (Lucian, *Hermot.* 79). Justin, the philosopher and martyr, who probably is aware of John 3 (*1 Apol.* 61:4f.), presents Jesus as perfect Socrates, i.e., superseding Socrates (*2 Apol.* 10.1–7) and interprets the Gospels as Jesus's *Memorabilia*. Thus, van Kooten's recent (2019) claim that Nicodemus's figure makes John's Gospel accessible to Greek readers who would be able to link the discourse between Jesus and Nicodemus to Plato's *Symposion*, is reasonable. From van Kooten's point of view, the name *Nicodemus* would echo the name *Aristodemus*. Aristodemus has been a pupil and interlocutor of Socrates mentioned in Plato's *Symposium* (174A), in a dialogue focussing on the different kinds of love and procreation (ibid.

208E–209A; cf Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* 1.4; Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* 707B; Sextus Empiricus, *Math.* 9.92). Readers who were acquainted with Plato’s dialogues in the early Imperial times could reflect on allusions to popular Socratic traditions, and characteristics, e. g. Socratic irony (Cicero, *Off.* I.108) (Whitenton, *ibid*). The portrait of Nicodemus reveals that John participates in current cultural discourses that presuppose a long process of interaction between Judaism and Hellenism and amalgamations of biblical and philosophical traditions.

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Von: Ruud van der Helm <Ruud.vanderHelm@brill.com>
Gesendet: Freitag, 2. Juli 2021 16:22
An: 'despotis@uni-bonn.de'
Betreff: Acknowledgement of receipt of contribution "Nicodemus" for publication in the Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity

Dear Professor Athanasios Despotis,

Thank you for your message and for submitting the signed Author Consent Form. I hereby confirm that you submitted your BEEC-entry about Nicodemus in December 2020. It has been pre-edited and is momentarily still for review with the Section Editor, Professor Geert van Oyen. According to expectations, we will be able to publish it this Fall in the EECO, the online platform of the BEEC. The print edition is due towards the End of 2022.

All the best,

Ruud van der Helm
Project Manager BEEC

From: despotis@uni-bonn.de <despotis@uni-bonn.de>
Sent: donderdag 1 juli 2021 21:32
To: Ruud van der Helm <Ruud.vanderHelm@brill.com>
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Dear Ruud,

I hope this finds you well.

I am currently applying for a new position, and I need confirmation that I have submitted my article on Nicodemus (see my e-mail and the attachment from December 18 2020) to be published in the Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity. By the way, I am not sure if I have sent you my consent. Please find it in the attachment.

With all best wishes

Athanasios
