

# The Unfinished Story of Nicodemus

## A Reader-Centered Approach

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A significant number of studies have dealt with Nicodemus's narrative character in the Fourth Gospel. Typically, such studies also deal with the Gospel's readership, either the implied or the historical one. Usually, however, it is not taken into account that every text, the Fourth Gospel included, has multiple readers with various points of view,<sup>1</sup> even if such readers are exclusively members of the alleged Johannine community, and all the more so if they are not.

On this basis, I will attempt to read and try to understand the narrative character of Nicodemus from the perspective of readers who are positively disposed towards the religious group that he belongs to, namely the Pharisees. Historically, such readers could themselves be former Pharisees who have converted to Christianity, Pharisees who are on the verge of converting, or even Pharisees who are skeptical about Christianity, although not altogether hostile.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, such readers could for instance also be Jewish-Christians who still respect and/or have positive experiences and relationships with the Pharisees, or Jews who consider Pharisees their rulers and at the same time are on friendly terms with Christians.<sup>3</sup>

I do not imply that the historical writer of the Fourth Gospel necessarily had in mind this particular category of readers, but I deem it a plausible hypothesis.<sup>4</sup> I have argued elsewhere that the Gospel of John seems to be addressing a wide audience

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard, one of the few exceptions is Gabi Renz, "Nicodemus: An Ambiguous Disciple? A Narrative Sensitive Investigation," in *Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John*, ed. John Lierman, WUNT 2.219 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 271–74.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Marc Michel, "Nicodème ou le non-lieu de la vérité," *RevScRel* 55 (1981): 234–35, who envisages an analogous audience for the Gospel, and especially for the story of Nicodemus; for the possibility of combining narrative-critical and historical analysis see Cornelis Bennema, "A Theory of Character in the Fourth Gospel with Reference to Ancient and Modern Literature," *BibInt* 17 (2009): 399–402, 420.

<sup>3</sup> Although the Fourth Gospel seems to base its narrative on a fundamental tension between the Jewish and the Christian communities (see 9:22; 12:42; 16:2), it is now widely acknowledged that open channels between the two communities continued to exist long after the alleged "parting of the ways." Therefore, the acknowledgement of "sympathetic Jews" by Sean Freyne, "Vilifying the Other and Defining the Self: Matthew's and John's Anti-Jewish Polemic in Focus," in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Christians, Jews, "Others" in Late Antiquity*, ed. J. Neusner and E. S. Frerichs, *Studies in the Humanities* 9 (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), 140.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Winsome Munro, "The Pharisee and the Samaritan in John: Polar or Parallel?" *CBQ* 57 (1995): 727; contra Michael Goulder, "Nicodemus," *SJT* 44 (1991): 167–68.

including both Christians and non-Christians.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, not all character-traits of the Johannine Pharisees are negative. Although the Pharisees typically oppose Jesus, some of them acknowledge that he cannot be a sinner and perform miracles at the same time (9:16), a statement that reminds the readers of Nicodemus's words in 3:2. Moreover, the Pharisees abstain from Jesus' conviction and execution, as opposed to the chief priests.<sup>6</sup> On this basis, I would suggest that the evangelist does not draw an altogether negative picture of them, but leaves open their development as a collective character.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, I claim that Nicodemus's traits enable the Gospel's readers to read his story in a positive light even concerning the Pharisees as a whole. First and foremost, the evangelist explicitly states that Nicodemus is "from the Pharisees," while he is the only individual and named Pharisee mentioned in the Gospel.<sup>8</sup> Obviously then, for the evangelist, Nicodemus's Pharisaic identity is one of his prominent traits. Since the Pharisee Nicodemus undoubtedly has some positive features, it is at least possible for the Gospel's readers to extend these features to other Pharisees as well, and not necessarily to consider him as the only exception.

On this basis, I will examine the three relevant passages of chapters 3, 7 and 19, in which Nicodemus appears. I will bring my considerations to a close by formulating some conclusions.

### 1. John 3:1–21

In this passage, the evangelist introduces the character of Nicodemus and portrays him as ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων, Νικόδημος ὄνομα αὐτῷ, ἀρχῶν τῶν Ἰουδαίων.

Significantly, the evangelist does not simply mention that Nicodemus is a Pharisee. Indeed, the evangelist never uses the term Φαρισαῖος in the singular, but only in the plural. In contrast, the evangelist repeatedly uses the term ἀρχιερεὺς in the singular as well.<sup>9</sup> He also uses the term ἀρχῶν both in the singular (3:1) and in the plural (7:26,

<sup>5</sup> See Christos Karakolis, "The Logos-Concept and Dramatic Irony in the Johannine Prologue and Narrative," in *The Prologue of John: Its Literary, Theological and Philosophical Contexts. Papers read at the Colloquium Ioanneum 2013*, ed. Jan van der Watt, R. Alan Culpepper, and Udo Schnelle, WUNT 359 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 150 and n. 66.

<sup>6</sup> See my analysis in Christos Karakolis, "Recurring Characters in John 1:19–2:11: A Narrative-Critical and Reader-Oriented Approach," in *The Opening of John's Narrative (John 1:19–2:22): Historical, Literary, and Theological Readings from the Colloquium Ioanneum 2015 in Ephesus*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Jörg Frey, WUNT 385 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 31–33.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Christian Dietzfelbinger, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 2 vols., ZBK 4 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2001), 1:80; Jean Marie Sevrin, "The Nicodemus Enigma: The Characterization and Function of an Ambiguous Actor of the Fourth Gospel," in *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel: Papers of the Leuven Colloquium, 2000*, ed. R. Bieringer, D. Pollefeyt, and F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville, Jewish and Christian Heritage Series 1 (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2001), 358.

<sup>9</sup> 11:49, 51; 18:10, 13, 15, 16, 19, 22, 24, 26.

48; 12:42). If the evangelist had used, e.g., the phrase ἦν δὲ Φαρισαῖός τις, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Νικόδημος, or something similar, he would have been simply signifying the Pharisaic identity of Nicodemus as an individual. As it is, the evangelist seems to focus on his belongingness to the collectivity of the Pharisees. On this basis, Nicodemus can here be understood as representing the religious group of the Pharisees, to which he himself belongs.<sup>10</sup>

As already mentioned, Nicodemus is the only Pharisee explicitly mentioned as such by his name. This fact underlines his particular significance for the narrative, as can be seen by his appearances at crucial plot points, namely right after the initiation of Jesus' public activity (2:13–23), during the first attempt of the Sanhedrin to capture Jesus (7:32), and during Jesus' burial (19:38–42).

At the same time, however, his being mentioned by name provides a concrete face to the Pharisaic collectivity. At this early point of the narrative, the Pharisees are not yet hostile towards Jesus.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, since as much as Nicodemus's presence is positive, the Gospel's readers are able to extend this positive impression also to the other Pharisees.<sup>12</sup>

To Nicodemus's Pharisaic identity and name, the evangelist adds his status as ἄρχων τῶν Ἰουδαίων, that is, a member of the Sanhedrin.<sup>13</sup> This is the only time in the Gospel of John that the title ἄρχων is used in the singular and attributed to an individual human being mentioned by name.<sup>14</sup> As opposed to the phrase ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων, the wording ἄρχων τῶν Ἰουδαίων implies that Nicodemus does not represent the Sanhedrin. In other words, the predicate ἄρχων τῶν Ἰουδαίων refers to a personal trait of Nicodemus rather than to the collectivity to which he belongs. Thus, in the minds of the readers, Nicodemus should here be more closely associated with the Pharisees than with the Sanhedrin. This is also historically plausible since the Pharisees are a more homogeneous group than the Sanhedrin.

According to Nicodemus's characterization so far, he is a man coming from the ranks of the Pharisees, and also a ruler of the Jews. The first property is important in connection with the collectivity to which Nicodemus belongs. The second property is important mainly with regard to Nicodemus's individual status.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> This does not imply that he was deliberately sent by them, as is the case with the ἀπεσταλμένοι of the Pharisees in 1:24.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Susan E. Hysten, *Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 28–29.

<sup>12</sup> Contra Renz, "Nicodemus," 260.

<sup>13</sup> See among others Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, AB 29 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 130; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium: Einleitung und Kommentar zu Kapitel 1–4*, HTKNT 4/1 (Freiburg: Herder, 1965), 379; Johannes Beutler, *Das Johannesevangelium: Kommentar*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 2013), 135; Martin Schmidl, *Jesus und Nikodemus: Gespräch zur johanneischen Christologie: Joh 3 in schichtenspezifischer Sicht*, BU 28 (Regensburg: Pustet, 1998), 98.

<sup>14</sup> The word is also used in the singular when referring to the devil as the ἄρχων τοῦ κόσμου (12:31; 14:30; 16:11).

<sup>15</sup> Some researchers have even attributed some symbolic importance to the word ἄνθρωπος in

Nicodemus's coming at night does not necessarily mean that he is hiding.<sup>16</sup> As the Jews and even the Pharisees are not yet hostile to Jesus,<sup>17</sup> Nicodemus does not need to hide.<sup>18</sup> Quite on the contrary, according to 2:23, many people in Jerusalem have already started believing in Jesus.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the reference to the night should be read within the framework of Johannine symbolism as referring to the world, lying in the darkness.<sup>20</sup> Being part of the world, Nicodemus is also in the darkness but emerges from the darkness to approach the light.<sup>21</sup> In the words of Jesus himself, this direction of movement is what everybody should be doing to be saved (3:19–21; 8:12; 12:36, 46). In this sense, it is probably not coincidental that the dialogue of Jesus with Nicodemus comes to a close with a reference to darkness and light.<sup>22</sup> Jesus' words in 3:19–21 clearly demonstrate that Nicodemus does not belong to those loving the darkness, that his works are not evil, but that he "does the truth" and approaches the light, so that his works, which have been carried out according to God's will and divine inspiration, can be brought to the open.

In addition to Nicodemus, only disciples and believers call Jesus "rabbi" or διδάσκαλος.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, John the Baptist's disciples call him teacher once. However, this title is of particular importance when addressed to Jesus by Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews and, according to Jesus' own words, "the teacher of Israel" (3:10).

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the sense that Nicodemus is here representing the entire human race; cf. Craig R. Koester, "Theological Complexity and the Characterization of Nicodemus in John's Gospel," in *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, ed. Christopher W. Skinner, LNTS 461 (London: Clark, 2013), 171–72; J. N. Suggit, "Nicodemus – The True Jew," *Neot* 14 (1980): 93. This is a possible interpretation of this word, although the evangelist often uses ἀνθρώπος in place of the indefinite pronoun τις. In any case, this interpretation is not relevant with the particular perspective of this paper.

<sup>16</sup> Contra Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium*, 1:380.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. J. S. King, "Nicodemus and the Pharisees," *ExpTim* 98 (1986): 45.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Otfried Hofius, "Das Wunder der Wiedergeburt: Jesu Gespräch mit Nikodemus Joh 3,1–21," in *Johannesstudien: Untersuchungen zur Theologie des vierten Evangeliums*, WUNT 88 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 36–37; contra Munro, "Pharisee," 715–16; Michael Theobald, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes: Kapitel 1–12*, RNT 4/1 (Regensburg: Pustet, 2009), 246; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:536.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Ernst Haenchen, *Johannesevangelium*, ed. U. Busse (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1980), 216.

<sup>20</sup> See Brown, *Gospel*, 1:130; Jean-Marie Auwers, "La nuit de Nicodème (Jean 3, 2; 19, 39) ou l'ombre du langage," *RB* 97 (1990): 487–89.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Francis J. Moloney, *John*, SP 4 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 91; Julette M. Bassler, "Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel," *JBL* 108 (1989): 638; Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Lecture de l'Évangile selon Jean: Tome 1: Chapitres 1 à 4* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), 287; Ben Witherington, III, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 94; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: SPCK, 1978), 204–05; Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 149; Koester, "Complexity," 175; Munro, "Pharisee," 716, 725; Keener, *Gospel*, 1:533; differently Goulder, "Nicodemus," 154; Sevrin, "Enigma," 360, who understands the night as symbolically referring to Nicodemus's "obscured and inadequate faith."

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Kiyoshi Tsuchido, "The Composition of the Nicodemus-Episode John ii 23-iii 21," *AJBI* 1 (1975): 97–98.

<sup>23</sup> The Greek rendering of the word according to the Evangelist (1:38); cf. Bassler, "Signals," 637; Renz, "Nicodemus," 261; Auwers, "La nuit," 489–90; Hylan, *Believers*, 26.

Despite his high social position, his political power and his profound and acclaimed knowledge of the Law,<sup>24</sup> Nicodemus sees in the person of Jesus a rabbi superior to himself and approaches him accordingly.<sup>25</sup>

In this way, Nicodemus is presented like the disciples of Jesus, without being one.<sup>26</sup> Here, the readers are able to evaluate the approach of Nicodemus as being similar to that of Andrew, the anonymous disciple (1:38), and Nathaniel (1:49), an approach that paves the way for them to become Jesus' disciples and follow him. On the other hand, Nicodemus has to overcome significant personal and social barriers,<sup>27</sup> which is not the case with the disciples, being themselves Galileans and not belonging to the Jewish aristocracy.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to addressing Jesus as ραββί and calling him διδάσκαλος, Nicodemus uses the first person plural of the verb οἶδα. Thus, he clearly identifies himself with those πολλοί Jews who witnessed the signs Jesus did in Jerusalem and, according to 2:23 believed in the name of Jesus.<sup>29</sup> At this point, the Gospel's readers have every reason to assume that this multitude of Jews includes a number of Pharisees as well.

In contrast to the disciples of Jesus in the first chapter, Nicodemus does not make here a christological confession.<sup>30</sup> However, he expresses the certainty that Jesus is a teacher come from God,<sup>31</sup> since no one can do the signs he does if God is not with

<sup>24</sup> This is confirmed twice in the following narrative: firstly in 7:51, when Nicodemus correctly interprets the Law, as opposed to the other members of Sanhedrin; secondly in 19:39–42, when he buries Jesus according to the lawful Jewish custom.

<sup>25</sup> This is because Jesus does signs that no other rabbi can do, which proves that he has come from God, which cannot be said about any other rabbi, including Nicodemus himself; cf. Witherington, *Wisdom*, 94–95; contra F. P. Cotterell, "The Nicodemus Conversation: A Fresh Appraisal," *ExpTim* 96 (1985): 240.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Bassler, "Signals," 637; Renz, "Nicodemus," 261.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Munro, "Pharisee," 714.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 81.

<sup>29</sup> On Nicodemus as a representative of the believing Jews of 2:23, see Wayne A. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *JBL* 91 (1972): 55; Brown, *Gospel*, 1:125–29, 137; Dietzfelbinger, *Evangelium*, 1:80; Klaus Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium: Kapitel 1–10*, Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 4/1, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2004), 116; Moloney, *John*, 89; Bassler, "Signals," 637; Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 54; Barrett, *Gospel*, 204; Sevrin, "Enigma," 359; R. Alan Culpepper, "The Weave of the Tapestry: Character and Theme in John," in *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, ed. Christopher W. Skinner (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 24; idem, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 135; idem, "Nicodemus: The Travail of New Birth," in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 314 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 253–54; Hysten, *Believers*, 24–25; Hartwig Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, HNT 6 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 183; Theobald, *Evangelium*, 245; Jean Zumstein, *L'Évangile selon Saint Jean (1,1–12,50)*, CNT 4/1 (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2014), 110.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 76; Udo Schnelle, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 5th ed., THKNT 4 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016), 100; Culpepper, "Nicodemus," 254–55.

<sup>31</sup> Hofius, "Wunder," 38, observes that in John the expression ἐρχομαι ἀπό or παρά θεοῦ never refers to Jesus. The correct Johannine usage would be ἐξέρχομαι παρά τοῦ θεοῦ (16:28).

him. This is an obvious first step on the way to a real christological confession, according to the following considerations.

Through the use of the verb οἶδαμεν, Nicodemus's statement can be brought together with the formerly blind man's confession in 9:31 (οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἁμαρτωλῶν ὁ θεὸς οὐκ ἀκούει ἀλλ' ἐάν τις θεοσεβῆς ἢ καὶ τὸ θέλημα αὐτοῦ ποιῆ τούτου ἀκούει).<sup>32</sup> In the story of the blind man's healing, although some Pharisees initially wonder how it is possible for a sinful person to do such signs (9:16), they all eventually agree that the miracle was done directly by God while Jesus is a sinner, expressing their certainty thereof by the verb οἶδαμεν (9:24). Instead, by using the same verb in the same form, the healed man argues that God listens to the one who is God-fearing and does his will, and not the one who is sinful (9:31). The use of the verb οἶδαμεν in the first-person plural obviously points to collective certainties. In the Jewish context, such certainties are normally based on the interpretation of the Law. The same goes for Nicodemus. In this regard, therefore, Nicodemus identifies with the formerly blind man and differs from the interrogating Pharisees.<sup>33</sup> However, unlike the formerly blind man, Nicodemus does not come to the conclusion that Jesus is a prophet or that his signs are unprecedented.<sup>34</sup> For Nicodemus, Jesus is a miraculous teacher with power coming from God.<sup>35</sup> On the contrary, for the man born blind, Jesus is a prophet, even superior to the earlier ones, since the opening of his eyes has no precedent (9:32). Jesus trusts the healed man for his faith and reveals himself to him as the Son of Man (9:35–37).<sup>36</sup> As a result, the formerly blind man worships Jesus (9:38). On the other hand, Jesus does not make such a revelation of himself to Nicodemus, as in accordance with 2:24–25 he does not trust himself in the believers of Jerusalem because he knows their hearts, i.e., that their faith is superficial and that they are not ready to accept his self-revelation.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the discussion of Jesus with Nicodemus is not clear, but highly symbolic and open to various interpretations, resulting in Nicodemus's confusion rather than in deepening his faith (see 3:4.9).

On the other hand, however, Nicodemus indeed expresses his faith in Jesus in some kind of a confession.<sup>38</sup> This confession, though lagging behind other confessions<sup>39</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Meeks, "Man," 54.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Haenchen, *Johannesevangelium*, 216.

<sup>34</sup> Contra John Blich, "Four Studies in St John II: Nicodemus," *HeyJ* 8 (1967): 43; Theobald, *Evangelium*, 248; Beutler, *Johannesevangelium*, 136; according to the latter the prophetic title is here implied. However, there is no plausible reason for the evangelist to present Nicodemus as avoiding the attribution of this particular title to Jesus if he indeed agrees with it; cf. 1:21, 23, 25; 4:19.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Neyrey, *Gospel*, 76–77.

<sup>36</sup> Being preferred to as the *lectio difficilior*. There are also other instances, in which Jesus refers to the "Son of Man," including his dialogue with Nicodemus in 3:13–14. However, the only instance, in which it is absolutely clear that he himself is the "Son of Man" is in his dialogue with the man born blind. Cf. also the question of the Jewish people about the identity of the Son of Man in 12:34, and of course Jesus' avoidance of responding to this question in a direct way.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Raymond F. Collins, "From John to the Beloved Disciple: An Essay on Johannine Characters," *Int* 49 (1995): 363.

<sup>38</sup> Theobald, *Evangelium*, 247.

<sup>39</sup> Contra Thyen, *Johannesevangelium*, 187.

like the ones of the disciples (1:41, 45, 49; 6:69), the Samaritans (4:42) or Martha (11:27), demonstrates a decisively positive attitude towards Jesus compared to the Pharisees, the chief priests and the rulers, who never use the verb οἶδαμεν in a positive way about Jesus, never make positive assessments of his signs and words, and never approach him to learn from him.<sup>40</sup> Given the aforementioned barriers that Nicodemus has to overcome, his approach and his words to Jesus are indeed noteworthy.<sup>41</sup>

The answer of Jesus to Nicodemus explains the latter's inability to see the kingdom of God and enter into it,<sup>42</sup> meaning that he cannot recognize Jesus as the Messiah in the Johannine sense of the heavenly king, whose kingdom is not of this world (18:36).<sup>43</sup> In essence, Jesus tells Nicodemus that his faith is not sufficient. The continuation of the dialogue goes along similar lines and reveals that Nicodemus cannot understand Jesus' teaching, although he is "the teacher of Israel"<sup>44</sup> (3:10). Characteristically, his very last words in the ensuing dialogue are: "How can these things be?" (3:9).

According to Jesus' words, Nicodemus cannot understand because he does not have the Spirit (3:5) and he is from below (3:6), which means that he has not yet reached an adequate level of faith (3:12).<sup>45</sup> Therefore, according to the Gospel's prologue, he has not received the power of becoming a child of God (1:12–13; 3:3, 5). Jesus' question, "You are the teacher of Israel, and you don't know these things?" (3:10) has often been interpreted as deprecating Nicodemus, in the sense that the latter should be able to understand what Jesus says due to his theological expertise.<sup>46</sup> However, in the Gospel of John, even the disciples are not able to understand Jesus' teaching. Therefore, Jesus' question in 3:10 is not just addressed to Nicodemus on a personal level, but through him to all the Pharisees and observers of the Law, and more generally to the Jewish rulers, who, like Nicodemus, are considered teachers of Israel.<sup>47</sup> This is apparent from the use of the first and second person plural in 3:11–12.<sup>48</sup> Jesus refers to the same persons when saying that they study the Scriptures to find

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Moloney, *John*, 255; Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium*, 1:378; Hulen, *Believers*, 26.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Eva Krafft, "Die Personen des Johannesevangeliums," *EvT* 16 (1956): 20; Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Commentary*, 81.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Koester, "Complexity," 175.

<sup>43</sup> See the relevant analysis of Jan G. van der Watt, *Family of the King: Dynamics of Metaphor in the Gospel according to John*, *BibInt* 47 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 170–78.

<sup>44</sup> The definite article ὁ does not mean that Nicodemus is the only teacher of Israel. It probably just implies that between the two, namely Jesus and Nicodemus, it is the latter who has the title and the function of being the teacher of Israel. Jesus, on the other hand, is much more than that; cf. Wengst, *Johannesevangelium*, 1:127–28.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Neyrey, *Gospel*, 79; Witherington, *Wisdom*, 93; Stibbe, *John*, 54; Beutler, *Johannesevangelium*, 138; Hofius, "Wunder," 53–59; Theobald, *Evangelium*, 255; Culpepper, "Nicodemus," 256; Hulen, *Believers*, 29.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. for instance Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium*, 1:388; Cotterell, "Conversation," 241.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium*, 1:378; Michel, "Nicodème," 230–31.

<sup>48</sup> Οἶδαμεν, λαλοῦμεν, ἐωράκαμεν, μαρτυροῦμεν, λαμβάνετε (3:11); πιστεύετε, πιστεύετε (3:12); cf. on the use of the plural as referring to the dialogue between a Jewish and a Christian collectivity Wengst, *Johannesevangelium*, 1:118–19; Moloney, *John*, 94; Léon-Dufour, *Lecture*, 1:296; Barrett, *Gospel*, 211–12.

eternal life, although the Scriptures actually speak of him (5:39).<sup>49</sup> However, believing in Jesus is not identical with understanding his words. In the Gospel of John, such understanding will only be given through the Holy Spirit (2:22 and 14:26), and the Holy Spirit will only come after Jesus' glorification (16:7). Believing is rather faith in the sense of trust in Jesus and devotion to him, namely the attitude of the disciples who are willing to follow Jesus to his death although they usually do not understand what he talks about.

On this basis, Jesus reprimands Nicodemus and through him the teachers of Israel not because of Nicodemus's lack of understanding, but because he expects him to fully put his trust in him and recognize him as the Messiah; in other words, to reach the level of the disciples' faith. As a teacher of Israel, Nicodemus is convinced that he understands the Law. By his question, Jesus seeks to shake this certainty of his. If, as a teacher of Israel, Nicodemus had been correctly reading the Law he would have recognized Jesus' authority and accepted his words, even without understanding their true meaning.<sup>50</sup>

The second person plural that Jesus uses in 3:11–12 answers Nicodemus's οἶδαμεν of 3:2. Jesus rejects the knowledge of Nicodemus and of the Jews he represents by stating that they fail to receive both his testimony and that of the Christian community.

The ensuing monologue of Jesus is a self-revelation in a cryptic way, not clarifying whom he means when he talks about the Son of Man, his descent from the heavens, his rising and so on. That is, Jesus continues not to trust Nicodemus, as he does not trust the Jews who believed in his name, seeing the signs he performed in Jerusalem (2:23–25). Had he trusted them, he would have revealed himself to Nicodemus, in the way he does, e.g., to the Samaritan woman (4:25–26)<sup>51</sup> or to the man born blind (9:35–38).

The inadequacy of Nicodemus's faith can also be detected in the way he responds to Jesus' words. Not only does Nicodemus express his inability to understand their meaning but he also puts forward objections to them.<sup>52</sup> In the first case, in 3:4, he expresses his inability to comprehend Jesus' statement by demonstrating its paradox, as he thinks.<sup>53</sup> Because Nicodemus is making an argument, it would seem that he talks with Jesus the rabbi from a position of authority being himself the teacher of

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Dietzfelbinger, *Evangelium*, 1:84.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. the similar view of Ludger Schenke, *Johanneskommentar* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1998), 66–68.

<sup>51</sup> See the narrative-critical comparison between Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman in Craig R. Koester, "Hearing, Seeing, and Believing in the Gospel of John," *Bib* 70 (1989): 333–36; Mary Margaret Pazdan, "Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman: Contrasting Models of Discipleship," *BTB* 17 (1987): 145–48.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Wengst, *Johannesevangelium*, 1:115; Schenke, *Johanneskommentar*, 68.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Wengst, *Johannesevangelium*, 1:122; Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium*, 1:382; Hysten, *Believers*, 31. On this basis, I would not consider the objections of Nicodemus as coming from a stupid disciple, contra Meeks, "Man," 53.



Israel. In the second case, he puts forward a more general objection to Jesus' words: "How can these things be?" (3:9). This objection betrays distrust on his part, the opposite of faith and trust. In contrast, Jesus' disciples, even though they do not understand his teaching, never express any objections or reservations to it. They only object regarding practical issues, such as the decision of Jesus to go to Judea (11:8) or, in the case of Peter, to accept that Jesus should wash their feet (13:8). So, while Nicodemus believes in Jesus as a miraculous teacher sent by God (3:2), he disbelieves his teachings. In this regard, it is characteristic how the verb *δύναμαι* is used in Nicodemus's questions. The verb *δύναμαι* is never used by the disciples in their questions to Jesus, with the exception of Nathanael before meeting Jesus and coming to faith (1:46). On the other hand, the Jews use the verb *δύναμαι* when doubting Jesus (6:52, 60; 9:16; 11:37). Thus, while Nicodemus is much closer to Jesus than all other Pharisees, Jewish rulers and teachers of Israel, he is far from him compared to the disciples, as well as other believing narrative characters, such as the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, Martha, and Maria.<sup>54</sup>

Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus comes to a close with a monologue. In the end, Nicodemus remains silent and plays no active role in the scene. But the readers can assume that he is still present<sup>55</sup> to hear an unexpected, indirect praise from Jesus: those who have good works come to the light (3:21). Nicodemus's silence may show lack of understanding, but, on the other hand, it could also indicate, at least for a particular category of readers, that Nicodemus now ceases to raise objections to Jesus' words. Of course, he still does not understand and remains confused. But at least now he listens. According to this reading, this attitude of Nicodemus could be considered as a further small step towards true faith after having taken the first step, which was to come to the light.<sup>56</sup>

## 2. John 7:45–52

The proof that Nicodemus is not in a state of disappointment and unbelief upon leaving Jesus can be found in his other two appearances in chapters 7 and 19. What is more, the evangelist himself explicitly links these two scenes with the first one, thus leading his readers to connect them with it as well.

In 7:45–52, Nicodemus clearly differentiates himself from the other Pharisees of the Sanhedrin. The Pharisees claim that no ruler or Pharisee has believed in Jesus. However, the Pharisees are not reliable characters in the truth and validity of their

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<sup>54</sup> This, however, does not mean that Nicodemus will never reach the level of the disciples' faith. His faith develops at a different pace compared to the disciples. In the end, however, we cannot but note a noteworthy, even if not final, positive development; cf. Beutler, *Johannesevangelium*, 510; contra Wengst, *Johannesevangelium*, 1:119.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Moloney, *John*, 90; Léon-Dufour, *Lecture*, 299; Munro, "Pharisee," 725.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Moloney, *John*, 97; Renz, "Nicodemus," 263; Thyen, *Johannesevangelium*, 412.

words (cf. 7:52), and Nicodemus is the living refutation of their claim.<sup>57</sup> At this point, the readers could even assume that besides Nicodemus there may be other such cases as well, according to the first person plural οἶδαμεν of 3:2. Moreover, in 12:42, the evangelist informs the reader that many of the rulers, Pharisees included, believed in Jesus. Consequently, Nicodemus is not a *sui generis* case but stands for a number of others like him as well.<sup>58</sup>

It is of particular value for Nicodemus's characterization to compare his and the other Pharisees' attitudes. While the Pharisees as a group accuse the Jewish people of being accursed because they do not know the Law (7:49), Nicodemus demonstrates their own ignorance of the Law (7:51).<sup>59</sup> Concretely, he points out that, according to the Law, no judicial decision may be taken (μη ὁ νόμος ἡμῶν κρίνει τὸν ἄνθρωπον) if the apologia of the accused is not heard (ἐὰν μὴ ἀκούσῃ αὐτοῦ) and his works do not become known (καὶ γινῶ τί ποιεῖ).<sup>60</sup> Some exegetes have discerned here a confirmation of Nicodemus's assumed cowardice as he avoids confessing his faith in Jesus, thus identifying himself with the rulers of 12:42–43 who "loved the glory of men rather than the glory of God."<sup>61</sup>

There is, however, also a different possibility of explaining Nicodemus's attitude, namely as his effort to protect Jesus, who is in imminent danger. By referring to Jesus' apologia, Nicodemus seems to have realized that his arrest is a matter of time. Therefore, he wants to safeguard the process ensuring that Jesus will have a fair trial. Nicodemus would not be successful if he were stigmatized as a Galilean, that is, as a disciple of Jesus.<sup>62</sup> On the contrary, he would be able to exert influence on the process if he maintained his authority. Therefore, he argues not based on his subjective opinion, but on the objective basis of the Law.<sup>63</sup> Even his silence after his being mocked as a Galilean (7:52) is not necessarily a sign of cowardice on his part. On the contrary, it could mean that he has already achieved his initial purpose<sup>64</sup> and therefore there is no need for him to continue the argument. Although the other Pharisees attack him verbally, they are not able to offer any counter-arguments. Therefore, not wanting to

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Brown, *Gospel*, 1:325; Moloney, *John*, 258; Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 80–81; Renz, "Nicodemus," 265; Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 135–36.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Schnelle, *Evangelium*, 199.

<sup>59</sup> See Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium: Kommentar zu Kapitel 5–12*, HTKNT 4/2 (Freiburg: Herder, 1971), 222; Renz, "Nicodemus," 265; Koester, "Complexity," 177; Severino Pancaro, "The Metamorphosis of a Legal Principle in the Fourth Gospel: A Closer Look at Jn 7,51," *Bib 53* (1972): 341; Culpepper, "Nicodemus," 257; Zumstein, *Évangile*, 1:274.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Exod 23:1; Deut 1:16–17; 19:18. Sevrin, "Enigma," 364, rightly observes that the verb ποιῶ could well be an indirect reference to Jesus' signs (σημεῖα ποιεῖν), which led a lot of Jews, Nicodemus included, to believe in Jesus, even if inadequately.

<sup>61</sup> See Brown, *Gospel*, 1:130; Klaus Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium: Kapitel 11–21*, Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 4/2, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007), 268; contra Thyen, *Johannesevangelium*, 413.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium*, 2:223; Lindars, *Gospel*, 304; Sevrin, "Enigma," 363–64; King, "Nicodemus," 45; Schnelle, *Evangelium*, 199; Culpepper, "Nicodemus," 258.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Renz, "Nicodemus," 266; Theobald, *Evangelium*, 546.

<sup>64</sup> Contra Haenchen, *Johannesevangelium*, 360.

get involved in a legitimate procedure against Jesus, they abandon the idea of arresting him, at least for now.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, at this point, Nicodemus indeed plays a positive role in protecting Jesus.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, by arguing strictly on the basis of the Law, Nicodemus is the only Sanhedrin-member to justify his status as a true teacher of Israel (cf. 3:10). According to this reading, it is not due to fear that Nicodemus does not confess his faith in Jesus. On the contrary, he does something that no one else dares to do, namely support Jesus, while at the same time maintaining his authority and thus eventually achieving his purpose. Nicodemus's attitude uncovers the final procedure of the chief priests against Jesus in the Passion narrative as being illegal and unjust, while his voice can be heard as the voice of the conscience of his fellow Pharisees, not only in the narrative but also in the real world.

### 3. John 19:38–42 with Reference to 11:45–53 and 18:1–19:16

The above mentioned could offer an explanation for the fact that Nicodemus does not argue against the Sanhedrin's decision to have Jesus killed (11:53). Of course, his attitude can be attributed to his cowardice or lack of faith. But it can also be interpreted as prudence on his part. According to the latter view, his silence can be understood as a silent insistence on the principle he had already formulated in 7:51, according to which no one may be judged and condemned without a legal procedure. Practically, through his silence, Nicodemus avoids being stigmatized and isolated by the other Sanhedrin members as a follower of Jesus and a traitor of the land and the nation (cf. 11:48), to be able to intervene objectively and therefore effectively in favour of Jesus during his upcoming trial, which now appears unavoidable. Because, however, Jesus' trial takes place during the night and is conducted by the chief priests, it is reasonable for the readers to assume that the Pharisees are totally absent, which would also apply to Nicodemus.<sup>67</sup> According to this scenario, the readers can assume that Nicodemus learns in retrospect of Jesus' condemnation and his execution, and eventually comes to Golgotha along with many other Jews (19:20) to see the already crucified Jesus without being able to do anything to reverse the situation.

To turn to 19:38–42, while Joseph is presented as a hidden disciple of Jesus for fear of the Jews, the evangelist says nothing of the sort about Nicodemus. On this basis, the readers are justified in viewing Nicodemus as being neither a disciple of Jesus nor

<sup>65</sup> In this sense, the intervention of Nicodemus is rather effective, contra Keener, *Gospel*, 1:734–35.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Theobald, *Evangelium*, 546. Of course, from the point of view of the evangelist, even without the intervention of Nicodemus Jesus could not have been captured because his hour had not yet come (cf. 7:30; 8:20). But this does not change the fact that Nicodemus supported him in the Sanhedrin.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Cornelis Bennema, "The Identity and Composition of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in the Gospel of John," *TynBul* 60 (2009): 248–49; Karakolis, "Characters," 33.

hiding for fear of the Jews.<sup>68</sup> According to this reading, the evangelist's commentary in 12:42–43 does not apply to Nicodemus,<sup>69</sup> whose attitude can very well be explained as daring.<sup>70</sup>

It has been suggested that the offering of the enormous amount of myrrh (19:39) shows Nicodemus's lack of faith towards Jesus in the sense that he does not believe in his upcoming resurrection.<sup>71</sup> However, from Jesus' response to Mariam's anointing his feet with myrrh (12:3–8), it is clear that Jesus accepts this kind of offering in connection with his upcoming death.<sup>72</sup> In the case of Nicodemus, the vast amount of myrrh, as well as the unused tomb (19:41), hint at a burial of royal-messianic character.<sup>73</sup> Of course, Nicodemus does not believe in Jesus' resurrection and is not able to. He is not an exception in this regard, as no one in the Johannine narrative believes in it before it happens (cf. 20:8–9).<sup>74</sup> But now, finally, Nicodemus seems to believe that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, so much so that he offers a considerable amount of money to buy a large quantity of myrrh to honour Jesus one last time.<sup>75</sup>

Furthermore, by his actions at this point, Nicodemus fulfills the requirements of the Jewish custom for the proper religious burial of Jesus according to the Law. He therefore reaffirms that he is indeed a teacher of Israel (3:10), not only in theory but also in practice, while, on the contrary, even Jesus' disciples are absent from their master's burial and remain hidden for fear of the Jews.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Contra Wengst, *Johannesevangelium*, 1:118; Bassler, "Signals," 641; Haenchen, *Johannesevangelium*, 556; Renz, "Nicodemus," 275; J. A. du Rand, "The Characterization of Jesus as Depicted in the Narrative of the Fourth Gospel," *Neot* 19 (1985): 25–26.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Koester, "Complexity," 180; contra Theobald, *Evangelium*, 547–48.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Munro, "Pharisee," 725–26; Schnelle, *Evangelium*, 376.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Meeks, "Man," 55; Dennis D. Sylva, "Nicodemus and His Spices (John 19.39)," *NTS* 34 (1988): 148–51; Neyrey, *Gospel*, 314–15.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Koester, "Complexity," 179; Munro, "Pharisee," 726. See, however, also the differences between the two cases, as noted by Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium: Kommentar zu Kapitel 13–21*, HTKNT 4/3 (Freiburg: Herder, 1975), 349.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Christos Karakolis, "'Across the Kidron Brook Where There Was a Garden' (John 18,1): Two Old Testament Allusions and the Theme of the Heavenly King in the Johannine Passion Narrative," in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert Van Belle, BETL 200 (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 757–58; Dietzfelbinger, *Evangelium*, 2:315; Moloney, *JohannaSto smus and the Pharisees open*, 510–13; Witherington, *Wisdom*, 312; Ulrich Busse, *Das Johannesevangelium: Bildlichkeit, Diskurs und Ritual*, BETL 162 (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 248; Renz, "Nicodemus," 275; Koester, "Complexity," 178; Auwers, "La nuit," 494; Thyen, *Johannesevangelium*, 754; Jean Zumstein, *L'Évangile selon Saint Jean (13,1–21,25)*, CNT 4/2 (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2007), 263. See also further parallels of this particular Johannine scene to a royal burial in Wengst, *Johannesevangelium*, 2:270.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Bassler, "Signals," 642–43; Witherington, *Wisdom*, 311–12; Sevrin, "Enigma," 366; Koester, "Complexity," 179.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, AB 29A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 960.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Keener, *Gospel*, 2:1162. This contrast proves, in my opinion, that Joseph and Nicodemus are not here representatives of the Christian community, as Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium*, 3:346, puts it, but rather of partly believing Jews.

#### 4. Conclusions

The significance of Nicodemus for the Johannine narrative as a whole is far from negligible. Nicodemus appears three times at key-points of the narrative. He is the only Pharisee mentioned by name. He is also the only Pharisee to believe in Jesus, initially as a miraculous teacher coming from God and finally, according to the narrative's symbolic indications, as the Messiah of Israel. He is the only one bearing the title "ruler of the Jews," in the singular number at that. He is also the only one to whom Jesus attributes the title "teacher of Israel," which he justifies with both his words and his actions. Besides, Nicodemus is the only one who, having all these traits, takes a favorable position towards Jesus. Therefore, Nicodemus is a special case and has significant individual characteristics,<sup>77</sup> as can be seen by the fact that he cannot be easily placed into the clear-cut categories of faithfulness or unfaithfulness.<sup>78</sup>

For this reason, Nicodemus has often been characterized as being narratologically ambiguous.<sup>79</sup> Whether indeed the evangelist deliberately shaped this character in an ambiguous manner or not, it remains a fact that Nicodemus can be interpreted as a character in various ways. For instance, he can be interpreted as a Jewish ruler, who, despite his authority, does not dare to confess Jesus, so as not to lose his privileges. By the same logic, Nicodemus can be seen as remaining silent during Jesus' final trial, thus bearing part of the responsibility for Jesus' condemnation and execution.<sup>80</sup>

On the other hand, there is also the possibility of a different and more complex reading of Nicodemus's story and character, as proposed in this paper. According to this reading, Nicodemus is the only one as a Pharisee and a Sanhedrin-member to repeatedly take Jesus' part. Admittedly, he is quite cautious not to incur any personal cost.<sup>81</sup> He is also so reasonable that he cannot accept Jesus' incomprehensible words without any objections. However, at the end of his dialogue with Jesus, he remains silent and, above all, his positive attitude towards Jesus never changes, even if he never becomes one of his disciples. On the contrary, his faith grows from seeing in Jesus a miracle-working teacher sent from God into recognizing him as the true Messiah of Israel despite his shameful death.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium*, 1:379.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Thomas Söding, "Wiedergeburt aus Wasser und Geist: Anmerkungen zur Symbolsprache des Johannesevangeliums am Beispiel des Nikodemusgesprächs (Joh 3,1-21)," in *Metaphorik und Mythos im Neuen Testament*, QD 126 (Freiburg: Herder, 1990), 195.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Meeks, "Man," 54; Bassler, "Signals," mainly 635-36, 645-46; Busse, *Johannesevangelium*, 100; Renz, "Nicodemus," 255-58; Colleen M. Conway, "Speaking through Ambiguity: Minor Characters in the Fourth Gospel," *BibInt* 10 (2002): 329-30; Raimo Hakola, "The Burden of Ambiguity: Nicodemus and the Social Identity of the Johannine Christians," *NTS* 55 (2009): 455; Hulen, *Believers*, 35-38.

<sup>80</sup> See for this line of interpretation among others Wengst, *Johannesevangelium*, 1:118.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Marie-Joseph Lagrange, *Évangile selon Saint Jean*, 5th ed. (Paris: Gabalda, 1936), 220, 503; Schenke, *Johanneskommentar*, 364.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. on the progression of Nicodemus's faith Suggit, "Nicodemus," 100-01.

At this point, the readers would have to wonder about the further development of Nicodemus: Did he reach the level of Thomas's faith (20:28)? Did he see the resurrected Lord? Did he join the Christian community? Or did he finally become one with the rulers who preferred the glory of the people to the glory of God (12:42–43)? Did he perhaps lose his faith altogether and become indifferent to or even an adversary of Jesus' community? The narrative does not provide the readers with any answers to such questions.<sup>83</sup>

On the other hand, it should be clear from the above analysis that Nicodemus is more than just a *sui generis* case. He also represents various groups to which he belongs: the teachers of the Law, the rulers of Israel, the Sanhedrin, but first and foremost the Pharisees. I have argued elsewhere that from a narrative-critical point of view the Pharisees are also an ambivalent narrative character in terms of how their story ends, despite their clear hostility against Jesus throughout the narrative.<sup>84</sup> Thus, Nicodemus's unfinished story could be implicitly connected with the unfinished story of his fellow Pharisees. Since it is mainly Pharisaic heritage that forms Judaism after AD 70, the author of the Gospel could have deliberately left the story of Nicodemus and the Pharisees open so that the readers who for some reason are positively disposed towards the Pharisees can complete this story in a positive way.<sup>85</sup>

Under such a perspective, Nicodemus can be viewed as a narrative model-character, at least for the particular category of readers that this paper focuses on. He is the first Pharisee, the first ruler, and the first teacher who approaches Jesus. Probably, there are others like him who want to do the same but do not dare. And there could be even more of them in the future. On the other hand, Nicodemus himself has to develop even further to finally reach true faith and become a disciple of Jesus and a member of his community.<sup>86</sup>

Thus, Nicodemus's example can potentially bring at least some of the Johannine readers to a twofold conclusion: (a) there are more individual Pharisaic rulers, such as Nicodemus, each one of them with his own characteristics and peculiarities, but all of them on a course of encountering Christ and his community;<sup>87</sup> (b) all Pharisees could potentially follow Nicodemus's example provided they do good works and adhere to the true spirit of the Law in the way Nicodemus does.

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<sup>83</sup> On this basis, contra Renz, "Nicodemus," 282, Nicodemus may still be "undecided whether he belongs to the Jewish religious establishment or to Jesus Christ"; cf. Culpepper, "Nicodemus," 259.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Bennema, "Identity," 248–49.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Hakola, "Burden," 445, 451–54; Schnelle, *Evangelium*, 105.

<sup>86</sup> Because the closure of Nicodemus's character remains open in this regard, Bassler, "Signals," 646, uses the social-anthropological category of "marginality." According to her, "marginals are neither outsiders nor insiders nor even in transition from outsider to insider. Rather they are simultaneously members of two or more groups, and unlike liminals have no assurance of a final emergence into a new state with consequent resolution of their ambiguity." On the contrary, I argue that Nicodemus clearly belongs to the Jews, though at the same time probably being in transition to a different group, namely as one of Jesus' followers; cf. Witherington, *Wisdom*, 93.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Uta Poplutz, "The Pharisees: A House Divided," in *Studies*, ed. Hunt, Tolmie and Zimmermann, 123–25.

Based on the above, at least for some of the Gospel's readers, Nicodemus could indeed function as the literary embodiment of a bridge between Christianity and Judaism in the time and place of the composition of the Fourth Gospel and beyond.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Cf. Sevrin, "Enigma," 369

