

# Nicodemus: Coward or Convert?

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Nicodemus

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Nicodemus is often portrayed as a cowardly or vacillating person. One commentary, for example, states that Nicodemus sought out “Jesus in ‘the night’ which has suggested to most of the interpreters that he was hesitant and afraid to be seen with Jesus, coming as he did in secrecy out of regard for his reputation and to protect himself.”<sup>1</sup> Because John, after Nicodemus’s first visit, identifies him as one who “came to Jesus by night” (John 7:50; 19:39), his every action thereafter seems to be colored by the timing of this first visit.

Besides cowardice, there are other possible explanations why Nicodemus would seek an audience with Jesus at night. He may have had a sincere desire to have a serious private conversation away from the crowded, county-fair atmosphere of the Passover-choked streets and temple precincts. He may have pursued an honest though cautious investigation of one who was reputed to possess miraculous powers, possibly the long-awaited Messiah. Or he may have been responding to the initial spiritual stirrings of a mighty change of heart.

## **Biblical Setting**

The meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus occurs at the very beginning of Christ’s public ministry, at the first Passover of that ministry. Before this meeting, the scriptural record gives the account of Christ’s birth, His visit to the temple at age twelve, His baptism, the temptations, His turning water to wine at Cana, a short visit to

Capernaum, and the first cleansing of the temple. Elder Bruce R. McConkie sets the scene: “Our Lord has driven from the Temple Court the sacrificial animals, probably numbering in the thousands; has used a scourge of small cords upon the carnal men who made merchandise in his Father’s House; and has extended his own arm of healing to bless and cure many—and all Jerusalem is aware of the miracles he has done.”<sup>2</sup>

Because of the carnival atmosphere in Jerusalem during Passover, it might have been difficult to have any kind of meaningful personal or private conversation with Jesus in the crowded streets or in the din of the temple courtyards. If we were able to walk the streets of Jerusalem at Passover in Jesus’s day, we would see ample reason for any sincere individual to seek a secluded setting in which to have a private, serious conversation:

The streets were blocked by the crowds from all parts, who had to make their way to the Temple, past flocks of sheep, and droves of cattle, pressing on in the sunken middle part of each street reserved for them, to prevent contact and defilement. Sellers of all possible wares beset the pilgrims, for the great feasts were, as has been said, the harvest time of all trades at Jerusalem. . . .

Inside the Temple space, the noise and pressure were, if possible, worse. . . . Sellers shouted the merits of their beasts, sheep bleated, and oxen lowed. It was, in fact, the great yearly fair of Jerusalem, and the crowds added to the din and tumult, till the services in the neighboring courts were sadly disturbed. . . . The rents of the sheep and cattle pens, and the profits on the doves, had led the priests to sanction the incongruity of thus turning the Temple itself into a noisy market. Nor was this all. Potters pressed on the pilgrims their clay dishes and ovens for the Passover Lamb; hundreds of traders recommended their wares aloud; shops for wine, oil, salt, and all else needed for sacrifices, invited customers, and, in addition, persons going across the city, with all kinds of burdens, shortened their journey by crossing the Temple grounds. The provision for paying the tribute, levied on all, for the support of the Temple, added to the distraction. On both sides of the east Temple gate, stalls had for generations been permitted for changing foreign money.<sup>3</sup>

Elder McConkie adds perspective to the crush in Jerusalem during Passover: “In the days of Jesus, the walled portion of the city encompassed some three hundred acres of houses and streets and markets and shops. . . . Tacitus speaks of a population of 600,000; at the time of the Passover this number rose to between 2,000,000 and 3,000,000. . . . At Passover time great numbers of Jews camped outside the city proper, but within the limits of a Sabbath day’s journey.”<sup>4</sup>

In the crowded Passover confusion, and following a very public clearing of the temple, Nicodemus would have been faced with the problem of arranging a meeting with this Galilean at a time and place favorable for his purposes. At night, when the masses of humanity had settled into whatever places of abode they could find, there might be some hope of privacy. The problem would be to locate this one person among the millions in and around Jerusalem.

Much later, after Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter and John followed the arresting party to the palace of the high priest. Because John “was known unto the high priest,” he seemed to have little trouble gaining access to the palace (see John 18:15–16). Obviously John was no stranger to the high priest and perhaps to others in power. Apparently John was, if not walking in the same circles, at least comfortable among those who wielded power in Jerusalem. Add to this Elder McConkie’s speculation about the possible location of Nicodemus’s dialogue with Jesus: “We are left to assume the meeting took place in a house owned or occupied by John in Jerusalem. If so, the interview may well have taken place in the guest chamber on the roof, which would have been accessible via outside stairs.”<sup>5</sup> If Elder McConkie is correct, it may have been fairly easy for an official with standing and influence in Jerusalem like Nicodemus to find Jesus, who was staying with an apparently well-known and well-connected John.

Certainly Christ’s actions at the temple had struck a nerve among members of the Sanhedrin, particularly the Sadducees, because of their intimate involvement in and their responsibility for the temple. The Sadducees “consisted of old high-priestly families who came to the front during the Maccabean war. They formed the Jewish aristocracy, and were powerful though quite small in numbers.”<sup>6</sup> This act was a direct frontal attack—if not challenging their authority, challenging at least their conduct in regard to their responsibilities for the temple. One would expect that the cleansing of the temple was most certainly a topic of discussion among members of the Sanhedrin headquartered in the heart of the temple complex in the Chamber of Hewn Stone.<sup>7</sup>

Nicodemus was not the only one who sought a private audience with Christ. His own disciples often queried Him privately, seeking clarification following His public teaching or seeking doctrinal understanding (see Matthew 24:3; Mark 9:28–29).

*Miracles.* Nicodemus states his reason for seeking an audience with Jesus by referencing the miracles Jesus had performed. John describes two distinctly different reactions that Jesus had on this occasion to those who claimed belief based on His miracles. John says that “many

believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did. But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all [men], and needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man” (John 2:23–25). The word *commit* is translated from the Greek verb πιστεύω (pistēō). Strong suggests some alternative translations such as: “to *have faith* (in, upon, or with respect to, a person or thing) . . . to *entrust*, . . . [or to] believe.”<sup>8</sup> A number of other translations use the word *trust* in place of *commit*.<sup>9</sup> Put succinctly, Jesus did not trust the people’s professed belief.

Jesus’s response to Nicodemus’s declaration of belief that He was “a teacher come from God” based on those same miracles was quite different. Nicodemus, having either seen or heard of these same miracles, approached Jesus with a virtually identical declaration: “We know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him” (John 3:2). Yet rather than discount the faith of Nicodemus as He had done with the many others who believed, Jesus entertained that faith and patiently taught and bore strong personal witness of Himself as the Son of God and of His atoning mission. Apparently Jesus’s measure of the man, though Nicodemus came by night, was different from His measure of the masses who professed belief based on the same evidence. It appears that Jesus did believe Nicodemus’s belief.

*A Pharisee and ruler of the Jews.* Nicodemus, as a Pharisee, would have been among those who were watching for the promised Messiah. As a member of the Sanhedrin, who derived their political power from the Roman government, political activists with a messiah complex could only mean trouble both politically and religiously. There was no dearth of self-proclaimed messiahs. Gamaliel mentions just two, Theudas and Judas of Galilee, who had gathered followers with claims of messiahship, only to be killed and have their movements fade away (see Acts 5:34–40). With Jesus’s public challenge to the Jewish aristocracy in cleansing the temple, with so little known about the man and His intentions, with other messiah figures having come and gone, caution could be seen as a wise approach, especially for a person of position. It would seem to be wise for one to “come and see” (John 1:46) for oneself as Philip suggested to Nathanael.

*He came by night.* An opportunity to have that personal conversation with Jesus in or around Jerusalem during Passover would likely have been available only at night especially after the very public cleansing of the temple. Elder James E. Talmage observed:

Apparently [Nicodemus] was impelled by a genuine desire to learn more of the Galilean, whose works could not be ignored; though pride of office and fear of possible suspicion that he had become attached to the new Prophet led him to veil his undertaking with privacy. . . . We must accord him credit for sincerity and honesty of purpose. . . .

Nicodemus was not the only one among the ruling classes who believed in Jesus; but of most of these we learn nothing to indicate that they had sufficient courage to come even by night to make independent and personal inquiry. They feared the result in loss of popularity and standing. We read in John 12:42, 43: “Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.”<sup>10</sup>

Edersheim notes the compromising position in which Nicodemus knowingly placed himself by meeting with Jesus:

We can scarcely realise the difficulties which he had to overcome. It must have been a mighty power of conviction, to break down prejudice so far as to lead this old Sanhedrist to acknowledge a Galilean, untrained in the Schools [see John 7:15; 8:41; Deuteronomy 23:2], as a Teacher come from God, and to repair to Him for direction on, perhaps, the most delicate and important point in Jewish theology. But, even so, we cannot wonder that he should have wished to shroud his first visit in the utmost possible secrecy. It was a most compromising step for a Sanhedrist to take. With that first bold purgation of the Temple a deadly feud between Jesus and the Jewish authorities had begun. . . . Nevertheless, Nicodemus came.<sup>11</sup>

*Rabbi.* Considering the standing of Nicodemus, and the standing of the people with whom he associated, such as the revered Gamaliel, we expect that Nicodemus was not haphazard in addressing Jesus as Rabbi. His was more than a simple greeting of courtesy, such as “sir.” Nicodemus put himself in a subservient position, as Elder McConkie notes: “Different degrees of honor were intended as people used the term *Rab*, meaning master; *Rabbi*, my master; and *Rabboni*, my lord and master.”<sup>12</sup>

*We know.* “Nicodemus speaks to Jesus in the first-person plural (‘we know’). Nicodemus does not speak to Jesus simply as an individual, but as a leader of his community. The first-person plural implies that Nicodemus’s community shares in his positive acknowledgment of Jesus.”<sup>13</sup> As noted, “among the chief rulers also many believed on him” (John 12:42). It would seem that Nicodemus, if his visit was indeed an act of cowardice, was nevertheless the bravest of his associates.

Eighteen years earlier, Jesus, then twelve years of age, was also in the temple. On that occasion, He sat “in the midst of the Doctors, and

they were hearing him, and asking him questions. and all who heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers” (Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 2:46–47).<sup>14</sup> We know from Walter M. Chandler’s research that some of the members of the Sanhedrin served many years. Some of their tenures in office would span not only Christ’s three-year ministry but also the period including His visit to the temple at age twelve. A few could even trace their service back to or near Jesus’s birth.<sup>15</sup> It is possible that some of those earlier “doctors” were among the current “chief rulers” who these many years later are said to have also “believed on him”—part of the “we” to which Nicodemus referred.

*A master of Israel.* Jesus’s rebuke of Nicodemus in pointing out his ignorance of spiritual things could have received a much different response in other settings or with other members of the Sanhedrin. One need only read of the occasion when Christ was brought before Annas for questioning about “his disciples, and of his doctrine.” After Jesus pointed out that His ministry and teachings were a matter of public record, He suggested, “Why askest thou me? ask them which heard me, what I have said unto them: behold, they know what I said.” Then, “one of the officers which stood by struck Jesus with the palm of his hand, saying, Answerest thou the high priest so?” (John 18:19–23).

The reason for such a reaction becomes clear when one understands the pharisaic reasoning and laws which they themselves had established. The Pharisees “had created new law, an oral law—the portion of the Talmud called the Mishna or ‘second law’; it is a law founded on tradition instead of revelation, a law that they esteemed to be of greater worth than the Torah, or law of Moses itself. A digest of Jewish traditions as well as a compendium of the ritualistic performances of the law, it was made up of formalistic minutae.”<sup>16</sup>

[On one occasion] twenty-four persons were excommunicated for having failed to render to the rabbi the reverence due his position. . . . Punishment was mercilessly inflicted wherever there was open violation of any one of the following rules established by the rabbis themselves:

“If any one opposes his rabbi, he is guilty in the same degree as if he opposed God himself.

“If any one quarrels with his rabbi, it is as if he contended with the living God.

“If any one thinks evil of his rabbi, it is as if he thought evil of the Eternal.”<sup>17</sup>

It seems clear that Jesus saw Nicodemus as a receptive listener. One would have thought that under the circumstances, Nicodemus, with

his position, learning, and wealth, if his coming were motivated by idle curiosity or timid discipleship, would have ended the conversation at this point. One has to wonder what was happening or what motives were driving this interview, for if Nicodemus were the least bit open to offense, this would have given him ample reason to feel injured.

*They testify of me.* John records Jesus’s testimony to Nicodemus as follows: “He who believeth on him is not condemned; but he who believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed on the name of the Only Begotten son of God, which before was preached by the mouth of the holy prophets; for they testified of me” (Joseph Smith Translation, John 3:18).<sup>18</sup> Elder McConkie explains, “Our Lord is speaking in the early days of his ministry. He is using plain, simple, and forceful language. The doctrine is strong. No parables are involved; nothing is hidden with imagery or in similitudes. He is saying plainly that men must believe in him; that he is the Son of God, the Promised Messiah, the Only Begotten of the Father, the One of whom Moses and the prophets testified. . . . It is plain and clear beyond question.”<sup>19</sup> For a person in Nicodemus’s position, that plain, open declaration by Jesus, if not true, was unmistakable blasphemy and this Galilean was worthy of death by stoning (see Leviticus 24:11–16; John 10:30–33). It will be remembered that blasphemy was the very charge the Sanhedrin would use three years later to justify Christ’s death (see Matthew 26:63–68; Mark 14:61–65; Luke 22:66–71; John 19:7).

*The Jews sought to kill Him.* Two and one-half years after Nicodemus’s visit, Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles. He had skipped the previous Passover in the spring. A year before that, while at Passover, He had healed an invalid on the Sabbath, “and therefore did the Jews persecute Jesus, and sought to slay him” (John 5:16). Having missed the opportunity to arrest Him at the most recent Passover, “the Jews sought him at the feast [of Tabernacles]” (John 7:11). On the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus finally made His appearance. John continues, “Now about the midst of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and taught” (v. 14).

*Never man spake like this man.* When the Sanhedrin heard that Jesus was teaching nearby in the temple courts, “the Pharisees and the chief priests sent officers to take him” (v. 32).

When the officers returned without Jesus, the chief priests and Pharisees demanded, “Why have ye not brought him?” (v. 45). The officers’ only recorded response was, “Never man spake like this man” (v. 46). The Jewish leaders then chastised the officers for being “deceived” like the common people. After all, they reasoned, “Have

any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him?” (v. 48). This must have caused some uneasiness among those whom we know were or may have been in this meeting of the Sanhedrin—people such as Nicodemus (himself a Pharisee), Joseph of Arimathea, and “others among the chief rulers” who also “believed on him.”

Nicodemus knew from personal experience what the officers meant when they said that “never man spake like this man.” On that night years earlier, Jesus had used phrases like “I say unto thee,” “we speak,” “we know,” “we testify,” “I tell you,” and “we have seen.” His authority derived not from quoting others but originated from Himself. Matthew confirms this principle, “for he taught them as one having Authority from God and not as having authority from the Scribes.” (Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 7:29).<sup>20</sup> Nicodemus had personally heard Jesus say in unmistakable language that He was the Only Begotten of the Father, the Son of God.

At this Feast of Tabernacles the scriptures next mention Nicodemus as he sits in this meeting of the Sanhedrin. A lone voice spoke in Jesus’s defense in that hotbed of hatred. That lone voice was Nicodemus’s, “he that came to Jesus by night.” Only Nicodemus dares to ask, “Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth?” (v. 51).

*Art thou also of Galilee?* It was an open secret in the streets of Jerusalem spoken in hushed voices behind Jesus’s back, “Is not this he, whom they seek to kill?” (v. 25). In spite of the loathing the Sanhedrin had for this Galilean and their determination to arrest, condemn, and put Him to death, Nicodemus’s defense of Jesus in that setting is characterized by some authors as “cautious” and as a “voice of mild protest.” Being a Pharisee himself and a member of that esteemed council, he probably would have been privy to their planning. The plan to kill Jesus had begun a year and a half earlier in reaction to His healing a man on the Sabbath (see John 5:2–16). With eighteen months of plotting against Jesus, the conspiracy was an open secret in the streets of Jerusalem. It is hard to imagine that someone in Nicodemus’s position could have been ignorant of what was afoot. He had to know the vitriolic rebuke he would receive if he said anything in Jesus’s defense. The reaction was so predictable that John informs us that those of the Sanhedrin who “believed on him” did not dare to have it known “lest they should be put out of the synagogue” (John 12:42). Yet Nicodemus spoke. He knew he was not alone among members of the Sanhedrin in his belief in Christ. There might have been some furtive glances at fellow believers before Nicodemus asked his question. Would those other believers,

some of the “we” spoken of in his interview with Jesus, follow his lead in as innocuous defense as a point of order?

Talmage describes the reaction by members of the Sanhedrin: “Maddened with bigotry and bloodthirsty fanaticism, some of his colleagues turned upon him with the savage demand: ‘Art thou also of Galilee?’ meaning, Art thou also a disciple of this Galilean whom we hate? Nicodemus was curtly told to study the scriptures, and he would fail to find any prediction of a prophet arising in Galilee.”<sup>21</sup>

*Joseph of Arimathea.* Nicodemus is next mentioned following the Crucifixion of Christ as he comes to the aid of a fellow Sanhedrist, Joseph of Arimathea. We hear nothing of Joseph during Nicodemus’s defense of Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles. He may have been absent. He may have been present but remained silent. The scriptures are silent about Joseph until the Crucifixion of Christ. John does tell us that he was “a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews” (John 19:38). When he comes forward to beg the body of Jesus, he is portrayed as “a good man, and a just man,” one who was “bold.” Nicodemus, on the other hand, though he was earlier the lone voice of protest and provisioned the burial with a gift of royal magnitude, is even on this occasion portrayed as somewhat reluctant, coming forward only after Joseph “boldly” goes to Pilate.<sup>22</sup>

Not only did Joseph own a tomb convenient to Calvary but, among the believers, he was uniquely suited to the task of obtaining the body from Pilate because of the office he held with the Roman government. Chandler writes, “Joseph of Arimathea is called in the Vulgate, or the Latin version of the Bible, ‘noble centurion,’ because he was one of the ten magistrates or senators who had the principal authority in Jerusalem under the Romans. His noble position is more clearly marked in the Greek version.”<sup>23</sup>

Commenting about Nicodemus and Joseph on this occasion, Farrar writes:

However much he had held back during the life of Jesus, now, on the evening of His death, his heart was filled with a gush of compassion and remorse, and he hurried to His cross and burial with an offering of truly royal munificence. The faith which had once required the curtain of darkness, can now venture at least into the light of sunset, and brightened finally into noonday confidence. Thanks to this glow of kindling sorrow and compassion in the hearts of these two noble and wealthy disciples, He who died as a malefactor, was buried as a king. . . . The fine linen (*sindón*) which Joseph had purchased was richly spread with the hundred *litras* of myrrh and perfumed aloe-wood which Nicodemus had brought, and the lacerated body—whose divinely-human spirit was

now in the calm of its Sabbath rest in the Paradise of God—was thus carried to its loved and peaceful grave.<sup>24</sup>

The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* concludes: “Though Nicodemus is often portrayed as timid, [John A. T.] Robinson is probably correct in seeing him as quite courageous. Most likely, Nicodemus came by night, not out of fear, but to avoid the crowds that would have interrupted his interview with Jesus. His reaction to the council’s desire to arrest Jesus was boldly calculated to bring out the irony of their lawless act at the very moment in which they were ridiculing the lawless behavior of the ‘crowd’ (7:49–51). And he certainly showed more courage at the Cross than did the absent Disciples of Jesus.”<sup>25</sup>

### Historical Nicodemus

The Talmud mentions a man from the period with a similar name: Nakdîmôn ben Goriôn.<sup>26</sup> The question arises as to whether the biblical and Talmudic figures could be the same individual.

Though common at the time, the name Nicodemus is not held by anyone else in the New Testament. Chandler was able to provide a partial list of the members of the Sanhedrin at the time of Christ. His list includes forty-two of the seventy-one members of that body. His list, though obviously incomplete, contains only one member named Nicodemus.<sup>27</sup> Obviously, there is the possibility that, with the absence of twenty-nine names, one or more individuals with the name of Nicodemus could be among them.

The *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* states, “A Nicodemus ben Gorion, who was a brother to the historian Josephus, a very wealthy member of the Sanhedrin in the 1st cent. has been identified by some with this man in the NT who came to Jesus by night. Nicodemus ben Gorion later lost his wealth and position so that some have attributed this reversal of circumstance to his having become a Christian.” However, the author then adds, “The identification is unlikely.”<sup>28</sup>

Frederic W. Farrar refers to Christian tradition when he writes:

Tradition says that after the Resurrection . . . [Nicodemus] became a professed disciple of Christ, and received baptism from Peter and John; that the Jews then stripped him of his office, beat him, and drove him from Jerusalem; that his kinsman Gamaliel received and sheltered him in his country house till death, and finally gave him honourable burial near the body of St. Stephen. If he be identical with the *Nakdîmôn Ben Goriôn* of the Talmud, he outlived the fall of Jerusalem, and his family were reduced from wealth to such horrible poverty that, whereas the bridal bed of his daughter had been covered with a dower

of 12,000 denarii, she was subsequently seen endeavouring to support life by picking the grains from the ordure of cattle in the streets.<sup>29</sup>

Chandler links the biblical and the historical Nicodemus based on wealth, name, and position: “We know from the Gospel account of him that he possessed great riches, and that he used nearly a hundred pounds of myrrh and spices for the burial of Christ. The name of Nicodemus is mentioned in the Talmud also; and, although it was known that his attachment to Christ was great, he is, nevertheless, spoken of with honor. But this fact may be due to his great wealth. There were, says the Hebrew book, three eminent men in Jerusalem—*Nicodemus ben Gurien*, ben Tzitzith Hacksab, ben Kalba Shevuah—each of whom could have supported the whole city for ten years.”<sup>30</sup>

Robinson sets forth the argument thus: “The connection alike of office, affluence and genuine, if ostentatious, piety is not at all impossible; and there could not have been that number of top people in Jerusalem with the name of Nicodemus.”<sup>31</sup>

The historical Nakdîmôn ben Goriôn fits all the characteristics described in the New Testament. He was, for example (1) a Pharisee, (2) a member of the Sanhedrin, (3) wealthy, and (4) one of whom “it was known that his attachment to Christ was great.”

Even if there were more than one member of the Sanhedrin with the name Nicodemus who were both Pharisees and wealthy, how many of them were also believers in Christ?

### Conclusion

The measure of the man should not be taken when he enters the door but rather when he leaves. Regardless of any reticence or motives that may be assigned to Nicodemus for seeking the interview at night, one must also take into consideration the effect of Christ’s teaching—the “Touch of the Master’s Hand”—on Nicodemus that evening and in succeeding days. One will recall that some of the early disciples (later Apostles) were somewhat skeptical on their first meeting with Jesus, yet they are not faulted. John gives us the account of Nathanael when he asks Philip, “Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?” He is invited to “come and see.” Then based on Jesus’s miraculous description of Nathanael praying, he bears witness, “Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel” (John 1:46–49)—thus a skeptic becomes a disciple and perhaps even an Apostle.<sup>32</sup>

According to Elder McConkie, “We are left to assume that following his interview with Jesus [at night], the processes of conversion

continued to operate in the life of Nicodemus.”<sup>33</sup> It would be hard to imagine an individual having a personal face-to-face conversation with the Lord in which he hears Christ bear witness in unmistakable language that He was the Son of God without that testimony having some effect. Either this was the height of blasphemy or He was the Son of God, the Messiah, or a political time bomb. One source postulates that “John used the Nicodemus interview to illustrate the statement in 2:25 that Jesus ‘knew what was in man.’ Jesus saw in Nicodemus a sincere seeker after truth to whom He could reveal a clearer and more complete knowledge of His mission than He could to many others.”<sup>34</sup>

Elder McConkie, in his *Mortal Messiah* series, quotes extensively from both Edersheim and Farrar. Edersheim writes concerning the connection between the Nakdīmōn of the Talmud and the Nicodemus of the Bible: “But there can scarcely be a doubt that this somewhat legendary *Nagdimon* was *not* the Nicodemus of the Gospel.”<sup>35</sup> Elder McConkie chooses, instead, to include in his work Farrar’s more positive assessment of the connection: “If, *as seems extremely probable*, he be identical with the Nakdimon Ben Gorion of the Talmud, he was a man of enormous wealth”<sup>36</sup>

If Farrar and McConkie are correct in their assessment that it is not just “possible” but rather “extremely probable” that the Nicodemus of the Bible and the Nakdīmōn ben Goriōn of the Talmud are the same individual, then the story of Nicodemus is one of the most dramatic stories of conversion and sacrifice in scripture. **RE**

## Notes

1. Merrill C. Tenny and Steven Barabas, eds., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), s.v. “Nicodemus.”
2. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 1:469; emphasis added.
3. Cunningham Geikie, *The Life and Words of Christ* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1891), 1:495–96.
4. McConkie, *Mortal Messiah*, 1:90.
5. McConkie, *Mortal Messiah*, 1:471. According to McConkie, “Such ownership is inferred from John 19:27” (*Mortal Messiah*, 1:478n2).
6. Bible Dictionary, “Sadducees,” 764.
7. For a good illustration of the temple complex, see David B. Galbraith, D. Kelly Ogden, and Andrew C. Skinner, *Jerusalem: The Eternal City* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 189.
8. James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 210–11.

9. The Revised Standard Version (RSV), the New English Bible (NEB), the Jerusalem Bible (JB), and the New International Version (NIV) all translate “pistēuō” as “trust.” The New American Standard Bible (NAS) translates “pistēuō” as “entrusting” (Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 157).

10. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1963), 159, 169–70n7.

11. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 1:381.

12. McConkie, *Mortal Messiah*, 1:253.

13. *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 9:549; see also McConkie, *Mortal Messiah*, 1:471; Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 159.

14. Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 371–72.

15. Walter M. Chandler, *The Trial of Jesus from a Lawyer’s Standpoint* (New York City: Federal Book, 1925), appendix I, “Characters of the Sanhedrists who Tried Jesus,” 2: 291–326.

16. McConkie, *Mortal Messiah*, 1:255.

17. Chandler, *Trial of Jesus from a Lawyer’s Standpoint*, 2:316.

18. Faulring, Jackson, and Matthews, *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts*, 448.

19. McConkie, *Mortal Messiah*, 1:478.

20. Faulring, Jackson, and Matthews, *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts*, 176.

21. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 404.

22. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 664–65.

23. Chandler, *Trial of Jesus from a Lawyer’s Standpoint*, 2:318.

24. Frederic W. Farrar, *The Life of Christ* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1874), 2:428–29.

25. David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), s.v. “Nicodemus.”

26. “The name, which seems to have been not uncommon among the Jews . . . is doubtless, like so many Jewish names at this period, derived from the Greek. In the Talmud it appears under the form Nakdīmōn” (Farrar, *Life of Christ*, 1:197n1).

27. Chandler, *Trial of Jesus from a Lawyer’s Standpoint*, 2:291–326.

28. Tenny and Barabas, *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. “Nicodemus.” John A. T. Robinson points out that “there are some interesting parallels in Jewish tradition which indicate that the name Nicodemus was a well-known one in Jerusalem at the time and attached to persons of considerable eminence and affluence. Whether there was any connection with our Nicodemus, and if so what, cannot be proved, but it does look as if John is not merely inventing. At the expense of a little diversion it is worth trying to set out and sort out the evidence. There are two sources of information, Josephus and the Babylonian Talmud” (*Priority of John*, ed. J. F. Coakley [London: Meyer-Stone Books, 1985], 284).

As part of the Talmudic evidence, Robinson recounts the story of Nakdīmōn ben Goriōn’s purported miracle. If the two be one, then perhaps because of Nicodemus’s previous personal experience with miracles, he was drawn to one who was

reputed to be able to perform miracles. Thus the dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus begins with, “Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him” (John 3:2).

For a more detailed analysis of the Josephus and Babylonian Talmud source materials, as well as a number of arguments for and against the thesis that the two are one and the same person, see Robinson, *Priority of John*, 284–87.

29. Farrar, *Life of Christ*, 1:197n1.

“Miriam, daughter of Naqdimon ben Gurion of distinguished parentage, whose marriage contract providing 1,000,000 gold denars for her widowhood.” This enormous sum Baron presents in contrast to “poor fathers [who] were expected to supply a minimum dowry of 50 denarii” (Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 2nd ed. [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1952], 2:113–14, 221).

30. Chandler, *Trial of Jesus from a Lawyer’s Standpoint*, 2:319; emphasis added.

31. Robinson, *Priority of John*, 287.

32. Bible Dictionary, “Nathanael,” 737.

33. McConkie, *Mortal Messiah*, 1:471.

34. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), s.v. “Nicodemus.”

35. Edersheim, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 1:381n1.

36. McConkie, *Mortal Messiah*, 4:239; see also Farrar, *The Life of Christ*, 2:428; emphasis added.

# Defining and Teaching Tolerance

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Our diverse world is becoming increasingly interconnected through travel, technology, commerce, and the exchange of information. At the same time The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, with about thirteen million members worldwide and adding around a million members every three years, is embracing a wide range of cultures and experiences.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite the world’s increasing interconnectedness, divisions based on culture, ethnicity, politics, race, and economic status remain. Sadly, these divisions—to which the Church is not immune—often erode and destroy relationships within the universal family of God. In response to these divisions, President Gordon B. Hinckley and many other world and religious leaders have repeatedly appealed for greater tolerance.

However, within this chorus of appeals for greater tolerance, a wide spectrum of meaning and intent has emerged. On the minimal side, tolerance may be defined as grudgingly “putting up” with someone we do not like. Such tolerance may avoid overt discrimination and persecution, but offers little else. On the other end of the spectrum, some promote tolerance as implicit acceptance of another’s differing ideas, opinions, and practices; anything less than full acceptance is viewed as prejudice and even bigotry. Of course, neither of these two extremes is in harmony with the gospel of Jesus Christ. How, then, has tolerance been defined and clarified by the Brethren in latter days?