

Who was Nicodemus in the Bible?

All that we know of Nicodemus in the Bible is from the Gospel of John. In John 3:1, he is described as a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a group of Jews who were fastidious in keeping the letter of the Law and often opposed Jesus throughout His ministry. Jesus often strongly denounced them for their legalism (see Matthew 23). Saul of Tarsus (who became the apostle Paul) was also a Pharisee (Philippians 3:5).

John 3:1 also describes Nicodemus as a leader of the Jews. According to John 7:50-51, Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, which was the ruling body of the Jews. Each city could have a Sanhedrin, which functioned as the “lower courts.” Under Roman authority in the time of Christ, the Jewish nation was allowed a measure of self-rule, and the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem was the final court of appeals for matters regarding Jewish law and religion. This was the body that ultimately condemned Jesus, yet they had to get Pilate to approve their sentence since the death penalty was beyond their jurisdiction under Roman law. It appears that Nicodemus was part of the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.

John reports that Nicodemus came to speak with Jesus at night. Many have speculated that Nicodemus was afraid or ashamed to visit Jesus in broad daylight, so he made a nighttime visit. This may very well be the case, but the text does not give a reason for the timing of the visit. A number of other reasons are also possible. Nicodemus questioned Jesus. As a member of the Jewish ruling council, it would have been his responsibility to find out about any teachers or other public figures who might lead the people astray.

In their conversation, Jesus immediately confronts Nicodemus with the truth that he “must be born again” (John 3:3). When Nicodemus seems incredulous, Jesus reprimands him

(perhaps gently) that, since he is a leader of the Jews, he should already know this (John 3:10). Jesus goes on to give a further explanation of the new birth, and it is in this context that we find John 3:16, which is one of the most well-known and beloved verses in the Bible.

The next time we encounter Nicodemus in the Bible, he is functioning in his official capacity as a member of the Sanhedrin as they consider what to do about Jesus. In John 7, some Pharisees and priests (presumably with authority to do so) sent some of the temple guard to arrest Jesus, but they return, unable to bring themselves to do it (see John 7:32-47). The guards are upbraided by the Pharisees in authority, but Nicodemus presents the opinion that Jesus should not be dismissed or condemned until they have heard from Him personally: “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” (John 7:51). However, the rest of the Council rudely dismisses Nicodemus’s suggestion out of hand—they appear to have already made up their minds about Jesus.

The final mention of Nicodemus in the Bible is in John 19 after Jesus’ crucifixion. We find Nicodemus assisting Joseph of Arimathea in Jesus’ burial. Joseph is described in John as a rich man and in Mark 15:43 as a member of the Council. He is also described in John 19:38 as a disciple of Jesus, albeit a secret one because he was afraid of the Jews. Joseph asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Nicodemus brought 75 pounds of spices for use in preparing the body for burial and then assisted Joseph in wrapping the body and placing it in the tomb. The sheer amount of burial spices would seem to indicate that Nicodemus was a rich man and that he had great respect for Jesus.

The limited account in John’s Gospel leaves many questions about Nicodemus unanswered.

Was he a true believer? What did he do after the resurrection? The Bible is silent on these questions, and there are no reliable extra-biblical resources that give answers. It would appear that Nicodemus may have been similar to Joseph of Arimathea in that perhaps he, too, was a disciple of Jesus but had not yet mustered the courage to declare his faith openly. Perhaps Nicodemus's final recorded act was his declaration of faith—although we are not told how public it was. His presentation in the Gospel of John is generally favorable, which suggests that his faith was indeed genuine.