

## PHARISEES IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL AND ONE SPECIAL PHARISEE

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Playing a relatively confined role in the Fourth Gospel, Pharisees appear in eighteen verses, usually associated with the leadership of the Jewish people.<sup>1</sup> As a group, they send priests and Levites from Jerusalem to question the Baptist (John 1:24) and soon emerge as staunch opponents of Jesus. That they are threats is apparent at 4:1; when Jesus learns that the Pharisees know he is baptizing more people than John, he leaves Judea.

Upon his return to Judea, Jesus again finds Pharisees in opposition. During Sukkot they collaborate with the chief priests in the Jerusalem Council (John 7:32, 45, 48). They are not explicitly present at Hanukkah (John 10:22). They take counsel after the resurrection of Lazarus (11:46, 47), which takes place before Jesus's last Passover (11:55) when they give the command to arrest Jesus (11:57). These leaders send soldiers to arrest Jesus during an appearance in Jerusalem (7:32), and they do so again just before the passion (18:3). When Jesus dramatically declares that he is the Light of the World, the Pharisees challenge him (8:13). Soon after, they react to his healing of a blind man (9:13–16), and so they ultimately show their own culpable blindness (John 9:40). The Pharisees' actively plotting against Jesus is part of the Synoptic tradition (Matt 12:14, 22; Mark 3:6), and the specific

1. In general, see Raimo Hakola and Adele Reinhartz, "John's Pharisees," in *In Quest of the Historical Pharisees*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 131–47, and Uta Poplutz, "The Pharisees: A House Divided," in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Literary Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. F. Cois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 314 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 116–26.

combination of Pharisees and high priests appears in Matt 21:45–46.<sup>2</sup> Although in John the chief priests alone plot against Jesus (John 12:10), the Pharisees soon reappear (John 12:19). They are a persistent part of the opposition.

On two occasions John associates the Pharisees not only with priests but also with “rulers” or “leaders” (John 3:1; 7:48). The association may echo traditional phrases, such as Luke’s pairing of Pharisees and teachers of the law (Luke 5:17; 14:3), or their association with Herodians (Mark 3:6; 12:13), rulers John does not mention. Except for one verse in the pericope of the adulteress (John 8:3), there is no hint in John of a connection between Pharisees and *scribes*, a frequent combination in the Synoptics.<sup>3</sup> The scribes appear nowhere else in John. At one point (John 12:42), the gospel distinguishes between Pharisees and other leaders. Moreover, the Pharisees instill fear among these “rulers” that they would be expelled from the synagogue for believing in Jesus.

The Fourth Gospel thus indicates that the Pharisees were an identified group, perhaps a *hairesis*, as Josephus calls them (*Ant.* 13.171), who collaborate with other leading Judeans. The gospel is not interested in describing what the Pharisees believed, although they haughtily contrast themselves with common people who do not know the law (John 7:49). From that episode readers might infer that the Pharisees take pride in their mastery of Torah. Although the gospel does not explicitly develop this theme, it relies on the Pharisees’ reputation as skilled in the law to set up a central claim about the significance of Jesus. Otherwise, the specific teachings of the Pharisees remain obscure. They do not articulate a position on the resurrection of the dead, as in Acts 23:6–9, or argue for a form of messianic belief, as in Matt 22:41–45, or fret about the relationship between Elijah and the Son of Man, as in Mark 9:11–12.

The Fourth Gospel says nothing about fundamental principles such as loving God and neighbor that Jesus would have shared with Pharisees. Neither is there any engagement with Pharisaic observances and concerns, such as dining with tax collectors (Matt 9:11; Mark 2:16; Luke 5:30; 15:2) or fasting (Matt 9:14; Mark 2:18; Luke 5:33); nor does the gospel mention points of contention on practices such as exorcism (Matt 9:34, 12:24), handwashing (Matt 15:1–2; Mark 7:3–5), or divorce (Matt 19:3; Mark 10:2).

2. For the probability that John knew the Synoptics, a hotly debated issue in the history of Johannine studies, see Harold W. Attridge, “John and Other Gospels,” in *Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, ed. Judith Lieu and Martinus de Boer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 44–62, with reference to other literature. If this is correct, John’s attitude toward the Pharisees in the person of Nicodemus may have been an attempt to modify Luke’s position.

3. Matt 5:20; 7:29; 12:38; 15:12; 23:2, 13–15; Mark 2:16; 7:5; 9:11; Luke 5:21, 30; 6:7; 11:53; 15:2.

The one halakic issue worrying Johannine Pharisees, like those in other gospels (Matt 12:2; Mark 2:24; Luke 6:7; 14:3), is Sabbath observance, which arises in connection with the healing of the man born blind (John 9:16). Jesus previously offered a defense of his Sabbath healing (John 7:19–24), an argument that resembles Synoptic defenses of Sabbath activity (Matt 12:1–8; Mark 2:23–28). In John the argument is addressed not to Pharisees but to the *Ioudaioi* generally (John 7:15).

Jesus in the Fourth Gospel does not warn against the “yeast” of the Pharisees (Matt 16:6; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1), nor does he condemn them as hypocrites, nor pronounce woes on them, although his judgment on them as deliberately blind is harsh. In Luke, Jesus consorts with Pharisees and dines with them (Luke 11:37; 14:1), but not so in John. Neither is there evidence in John of the sympathy Pharisees showed in warning Jesus about Herod Antipas (Luke 13:31), although their warning could also represent an effort to suppress the mission of Jesus. Yet some Pharisees believe in Jesus. Some things done by Pharisees in the Synoptics are assigned to other characters in John. Thus, the Pharisees ask for a “sign from heaven” in Mark 8:11, which Jesus criticizes the crowds for doing in John 6:30.

Some matters of Jewish belief and practice in the Fourth Gospel may have Pharisaic connections. The famous “stone jars” at Cana (John 2:6) and the elaborate pools of Bethzatha and Siloam have been associated with the Pharisees,<sup>4</sup> although the association is hardly certain.<sup>5</sup> In any case such connections are of no interest to the evangelist. The evangelist is not concerned to catalogue historical facts but to present a dramatic narrative that will lead readers (or hearers) to encounter the incarnate Word.

4. Roland Deines, *Jüdische Steingefässe und pharisäische Frömmigkeit: eine archäologisch-historischer Beitrag zum Verständnis von Joh 2,6 und der jüdischen Reinheitshalacha zur Zeit Jesu*, WUNT 2.52 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993); Mordechai Aviam, “Distribution Maps of Archaeological Data from the Galilee: An Attempt to Establish Zones Indicative of Ethnicity and Religious Affiliation,” in *Religion, Ethnicity, and Identity in Ancient Galilee: A Region in Transition*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, Jürgen Zangenberg, and Dale Martin, WUNT 210 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 115–32, esp. 119; Jonathan Reed, “Stone Vessels and Gospel Texts: Purity and Socio-economics in John 2,” in *Zeichen aus Text und Stein: Auf dem Weg zu einer Archäologie des Neuen Testaments*, ed. Stefan Alkier and Jürgen Zangenberg, Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter 42 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 381–401; Jodi Magness, *Stone and Dung, Oil and Spit: Jewish Daily Life in the Time of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 54–77, and Yonatan Adler, “Religion, Judaism: Purity in the Roman Period,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Bible and Religion*, ed. Samuel E. Balentine, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2:240–49.

5. See the chapter in this volume by Eric Myers.

## THE EVANGELIST'S PROGRAM IN DEPICTING PHARISEES

The Pharisees are part of a larger picture of the Jewish leadership opposed to Jesus, a picture that may well have developed during the history of the gospel's composition. Urban von Wahlde, for example, proposes a three-stage or "three-edition" editorial process. The role of the Pharisees as the chief opponents of Jesus characterizes the first edition. They are then displaced by the *Ioudaioi* in the second edition.<sup>6</sup> The gospel's initial narrative illustrates the phenomenon. John 1:19 reports that people were sent by the *Ioudaioi* to question the Baptizer. Several verses later the narrator notes that they were sent "from the Pharisees." The verse presents several thorny exegetical issues. The preposition "from" (ἐκ) suggests that the Pharisees are the group that supplied the interrogators, although some interpreters argue that this is an unusual use of the preposition, which is here equivalent to ἀπό ("from").<sup>7</sup> A reasonable construal of the data suggests that the original story had the Pharisees sending questioners; a secondary stage of redaction converted the senders to *Ioudaioi* and accommodated the old account by changing the preposition.

Another, clearer, case of Pharisees morphing into *Ioudaioi* appears in chapters 7 and 8, a lengthy account of Jesus's interaction with people in Jerusalem during the feast of Sukkot. Early in the conversation in John 7 there are various interlocutors, with Pharisees prominent (John 7:32, 45, 48). In the latter stages, as relations between Jesus and his interlocutors become more tense, the Pharisees disappear and leave only the *Ioudaioi* (John 8:22, 31, 48, 52, 57). Readers emerge from chapter 8 with the sense that the *Ioudaioi*, who are "children of the Devil" (8:44) and share their father's fixation on death, are Jesus's major foes. A simple hypothesis of two stages of composition is attractive, but it does not resolve all the passage's difficulties.

The *Ioudaioi* are part of the scene from the beginning, instilling fear (John 7:13), marveling at an illiterate's learning (7:15), wondering about his intended departure, perhaps to the gentiles (7:35). Some of these *Ioudaioi*, like the inhabitants of Jerusalem (2:23), even believe in Jesus (8:31). The references to these characters show their complexity, which has led to the controversy about how exactly to translate the term *Ioudaioi*. Some of these passages play on a geographical sense by contrasting urbanites, who pride themselves on their

6. Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, 3 vols., Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 1:63–68.

7. So Johannes Beutler, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. Michael Tait (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 56.

literacy (7:15), with poor Galileans. Their denigration of Jesus as a Samaritan (8:48) indicates a similar geographical orientation. At times the characters are simply obtuse, as in their mistaking Jesus's predicted departure for a threat to commit suicide (8:22). Their assumption undermines the pride in their urban sophistication. Some of this depiction of the urban elite *Ioudaioi* may rest on a source or earlier layer of the gospel. If so, *Ioudaioi* are not simply the work of a final editor.


At the end of Sukkot, while some have believed in Jesus, the *Ioudaioi*—provoked by his severe critique and extraordinary claims—pick up stones to kill him (John 8:59). Their resistance to Jesus is not simply a matter of regional prejudice. They have a profound disagreement with what he says. In chapter 8, the opposition morphs from Pharisees to *Ioudaioi*. Pharisees return as the main opponents in the earlier verses of chapter 9.

The substitution of *Ioudaioi* for Pharisees as Jesus's leading opponents, as J. Louis Martyn and others long ago suggested,<sup>8</sup> enables the experience of the audience to be connected with the story of Jesus.<sup>9</sup> For the evangelist, the Pharisees anticipate the *Ioudaioi* who continue to oppose Jesus; those *Ioudaioi* in turn continue the Pharisees' work. Whether the *Ioudaioi* of the evangelist's day had a connection with the Pharisees of Jesus's day is possible but not certain; the connection may be a Johannine literary device. That there were tensions between followers of Jesus and other Jews is clear enough from other early sources. Such tensions could have arisen without Pharisaic influence, and the Fourth Gospel—like the Acts of the Apostles—holds out the possibility that some *Ioudaioi*, and some Pharisees, were not part of the opposition. That leads us to the case of a particular Pharisee.

8. J. Louis Martyn, *The Gospel of John in Christian History: Essays for Interpreters* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978); and *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (rev. ed. Nashville: Abingdon, 1979; 3rd ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Michael Goulder "Nicomodemus," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44 (1991): 153–68, suggests that the *Ioudaioi* represent Jewish Christians in the province of Asia, the opponents of Paul in Galatians.

9. For the initial hypothesis, see Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*. Martyn's formulation of a "two-level drama" with a correlation to Jewish-Christian relations severed by the invention of the Birkat Haminim at the Council of Yavneh (Jamnia) has drawn significant criticism. See Adele Reinhartz, *Cast Out of the Covenant: Jews and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2018), with earlier literature. The relationship between Jesus believers and Jews was more complicated temporally and geographically than Martyn's hypothesis suggests. Yet there were tensions in the relationship in the first century and these, rather than conditions in the time of Jesus, are probably reflected in the Johannine passages about "expulsion from the synagogue."

## THE JOHANNINE DEPICTION OF A SPECIAL PHARISEE: NICODEMUS

An intriguing feature of the gospel is that it highlights an individual Pharisee by name and traces a trajectory of his relationship with Jesus. That trajectory displays considerable ambivalence and a bit of mystery. The story is that of Nicodemus, characterized at his first appearance (John 3:1) as a Pharisee and “leader of the Jews.” As already noted, the gospel has just reported that some residents of Jerusalem believed in Jesus, who in turn did not trust them because he knew  what was in the human heart. Jesus’s skepticism toward some “believers” frames the encounter with this special Pharisee.

Nicodemus appears three times in the Fourth Gospel, first in his nocturnal conversation with Jesus (John 3:1–21), with whatever connotations that setting might conjure. Nicodemus may be part of the darkness, or the light of Jesus may shine upon him. He reappears in a meeting of the high priests and Pharisees (7:50–52). His last appearance is when he and Joseph of Arimathea bring to the tomb a hundred-liter mixture of myrrh and aloes, a costly funeral benefaction (19:38–42). The three passages raise intriguing questions: the history of its composition; the issue of whether Nicodemus can be identified with any known first-century individual, and, most important, how readers are to assess this character.

The initial encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3 loosely resembles the story of the rich man who asks what he must do to be saved (Matt 19:16–22; Mark 10:17–22; Luke 18:18–23). If that story, in its Synoptic form or in an independent tradition, is the inspiration for the interview with Nicodemus, the evangelist has thoroughly reworked it. The questioner is named. He does not explicitly ask about salvation, although Jesus responds to him on the subject. Jesus does not tell him that he must obey the Torah or give all to the poor but that he must be born *ἄνωθεν* (“from above” or “again”). The Johannine reworking may have evolved in two phases, the first reflecting on the theme of birth and the spirit (John 3:3–10) and the second on the significance of the Son of Man’s coming (3:11–20).<sup>10</sup> As usual the text is multilayered and rich with symbols.

History as well as symbolism may lie behind the text. Nicodemus, whose name means “Conqueror of the People,” may be based on a real individual.<sup>11</sup> In *Jewish War* (J. W. 2.451), Josephus mentions a Gorion, part of a trio that

10. For this hypothesis, see von Wahlde, *Gospel and Letters of John*, 3:565–66.

11. Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979), 72; R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*, New Testa-

accepts the surrender of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem in 66, an acceptance that results in a massacre of the disarmed Romans. Josephus also mentions a Joseph, son of Gorion (*J. W.* 2.563), one of two men elected to lead the rebellion in Jerusalem after the defeat of Cestius. There is yet another Gorion, son of Joseph (*J. W.* 4.159, 358). The Gorions were thus heavily involved in the insurrection. All these may be related.

The Gorions, whether one or many, are of interest because the first, in *J. W.* 2.451, was the son of Nicodemus, at least according to the Latin translation of Josephus; the Greek reads *Nicomedes*. The reverse variant occurs in *Ant.* 14.37 about another figure. Let us assume for the sake of argument that the Latin translation is correct here, that the Greek has it right in *Ant.* 14.37, and that neither witness was influenced by John's Gospel. So the name of the father of the revolutionary leader Gorion was Nicodemus, who would have been active in the early part of the first century CE.

Richard Bauckham, who has made the most of this data, suggests that all of these characters are related to a first-century BCE figure Nicodemus, also known from Josephus.<sup>12</sup> This Nicodemus was an envoy from Aristobulus II to Pompey, according to *Ant.* 14.37, where, as noted, the Latin reads *Nicomedes*.<sup>13</sup> This sequence of named Judean leaders illustrates the practice of naming children for their grandparents. They confirm that the name Nicodemus was associated with a rich and influential family, the kind of character depicted in John 3.

There are characteristics associated with this family that the invocation of their forebear might evoke. In the reference to the murder of the last Gorion in *J. W.* 4.358, Josephus comments on his character. According to Thackeray's translation, he is "a person of exalted rank and birth, and yet a democrat and filled with liberal principles, if ever a Jew was; his outspokenness, added to the privileges of his position, was the main cause of his ruin" (*J. W.* 4.358). Thackeray's "liberal principles" translates *φρονήματος ἐλευθερίου*, better rendered as "a freedom-loving attitude." We cannot know whether this attitude characterized all of the family or whether the name of the revered ancestor, Nicodemus, also evoked the family's political leanings. Tempting though such

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ment Foundations and Facets (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 136–37; Jouette Bassler, "Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel," *JBL* 108 (1989): 635–46.

12. Richard Bauckham, "Nicodemus and the Gurion Family," *JTS* 47 (1996): 1–37.

13. "And not long afterward envoys again come to him [viz. Pompey, in Damascus; source Strabo?], Antipater on behalf of Hyrcanus, and Nicodemus (Lat. *Nicomedes*) on behalf of Aristobulus; the latter, indeed, also accused Gabinius and Scaurus of taking money from him, Gabinius first getting three hundred talents, and Scaurus later four hundred."

speculation might be, there is nothing in John's characterization of Nicodemus to point in that political direction.

The evidence from Josephus has often been connected with later rabbinic sources<sup>14</sup> that mention a Naqdimon ben Gorion. Babylonian Talmud Gittin 56a (fourth–sixth century) reports that when Vespasian besieged Jerusalem there were three wealthy people, Naqdimon ben Gorion, Ben Kalba Savua, and Ben Tsitsit Hakesat.<sup>15</sup> The text then offers etymologies of their names. Naqdimon received his because the “sun shined (*naqad*) on him.” The etymology thus makes Hebrew sense of a Greek name.

Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 19b–20a offers a more elaborate account with the same conclusion. It tells of a pilgrimage festival when water was scarce in Jerusalem. Naqdimon approached a Roman officer, borrowed a supply of water for pilgrims, and promised to return it on a specific date or to pay twelve talents of silver. The day came, the officer demanded repayment several times, but Naqdimon delayed till late in the day, when, after earnest prayer, rain fell. The lender still demanded his money, since Naqdimon had not paid his debt while the sun shone. After another round of prayer, the sun broke through the rainclouds. So Naqdimon indeed repaid his debt on time.

An addendum evidences further anxiety about the name. An anonymous sage reports that Naqdimon's real name was Buni, and that Naqdimon was just a nickname that referred to the shining of the sun. As Bauckham notes, the nickname, also noted in b. Abod. Zar. 25a, may recall David's commander Benaiah (2 Sam 23:20–23; 1 Chr 11:22–25; 27:5–6), who became Solomon's commander in chief (1 Kgs 2:28–35; 4:4). That nickname also appears in a rabbinic list of five disciples of Jesus (b. Sanh. 43a), Mattai, Naqqai, Naser, Buni, Todah, which leads to the possibility that Naqdimon, if he is the Buni mentioned in b. Sanh. 43a, was remembered as a follower of Jesus.<sup>16</sup> Naqqai might also count as a reference to Nicodemus.

14. John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica*, 4 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 3:262–63; Joseph G. Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times and Teaching*, trans. Herbert Danby (New York: Macmillan, 1925, 1929; Boston: Beacon, 1964), 29–30; Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 6 vols. (Munich: Beck, 1922–61), 2:413–19; John Paulien, “Nicodemus,” *ABD* 4:1105–6; Michael J. Taylor, *John, the Different Gospel: A Reflective Commentary* (Staten Island: Alba House, 1983), 187.

15. Lam. Rab. 1:5.31 and Eccl. Rab. 7.12.1 claim that each of the three men was able to supply the city with food for ten years.

16. Cf. also Gen. Rab. 41:1; 98:8; Lam. Rab. 1:5.31; Eccl. Rab. 7.12.1; Avot R. Nat. [A] 6 [B] 13.



Genesis Rabbah 42:1 tells a story of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, who, to his father's consternation, became a disciple of the rabbis. His father became more sympathetic when he found Eliezer teaching three of the wealthiest men in Jerusalem, Ben Tsitsit Hakesat, Naqdimon ben Gurion, and Ben Kalba Shavua, the same figures b. Git. 56a mentions. There is no hint here of affection for Jesus, but the story suggests that Naqdimon was a disciple, if not of the Pharisees, at least of a prominent rabbi.

Other rabbinic texts feature Naqdimon's daughter, Miriam, who was reduced to beggary after the destruction of Jerusalem. These stories contrast the family's prewar wealth and privilege and their postwar poverty but do not shed any light on Naqdimon's beliefs or affiliations.<sup>17</sup>

These late-antique accounts reflect Jewish traditions, perhaps in some cases influenced by Christian sources, about Jesus's disciples. They may, perhaps, also have some element of historicity to them. John A. T. Robinson thought that the Nicodemus of Jesus's day was the grandfather of the rabbinic Naqdimon.<sup>18</sup> Bauckham prefers the possibility that the figure of Jesus's day was the uncle of the Nicodemus mentioned in Josephus, and the brother of a Gurion,<sup>19</sup> but such identifications remain speculative.

Whatever the relationship among the Nicodemuses in Josephus, Naqdimon ben Gurion, and the Fourth Gospel, they apparently belong to the same family prominent in first-century Judean leadership. A member of this lineage probably stands behind the character of Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel, either because the gospel has access to a historical memory of a Pharisee's attraction to Jesus, or because the evangelist deemed it appropriate to use a prominent figure to represent the kind of sympathetic Pharisees attested in Acts 15:5; 23:9. In other words, the relationship of Nicodemus to Jesus may not be historical fact but a literary effort to find a representative of Judean leadership who could be cast as a possible follower of Jesus.<sup>20</sup>

17. b. Ketub. 66b, 67a, which also tells of the charity of Naqdimon; y. Ketub. 5:11; t. Ketub. 5:9; Lam. Rab. 1:1.48; Avot R. Nat. A 16–17, all usefully discussed in Bauckham, "Nicodemus," 9–12.

18. John A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John*, ed. J. F. Coakley (London: SCM, 1985; Oak Park, IL: Meyer-Stone, 1987), 284–87.

19. Bauckham, "Nicodemus," 33.

20. Some commentators allow for the possibility that the Johannine character is to be identified with the Talmudic figure. So, e.g., Charles K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 204; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 2 vols., AB 29–29A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 1:130.

Whatever the potential historical allusion, John's narrative portrays what attraction to Jesus might involve. Nicodemus is first filled with curiosity or wonder because of the "signs" that Jesus performed (John 3:2) and thinks that such things can only be done by one sent by God. Jesus will later criticize those drawn to him because they see signs in such a way (4:48). The ensuing conversation in John 3 reveals little more about Nicodemus. He acknowledges Jesus as "Rabbi" and "teacher from God" (3:2), categories that may reflect a Pharisaic dedication to the study of Torah.<sup>21</sup> The conversation does not pursue any halakic issue. Instead, Jesus shapes the discourse by moving Nicodemus away from a reliance on signs. He does so by claiming that "entry into," or later "sight of," the kingdom of God depends on birth *ἄνωθεν* ("from above" or "again").<sup>22</sup> A further explanation by Jesus that this birth has to do *not* with reentry to the womb but with water and the Spirit leaves Nicodemus puzzled. The ironic episode assumes that readers will understand what Nicodemus cannot, that the ritual of Christian initiation establishes a new and "abiding" relationship with God. While Nicodemus may be, as Jesus describes him, a "teacher of Israel" (John 3:10), he lacks the capacity to accept Jesus's teaching.

Another allusion to the kind of teaching that Nicodemus represents may lie in Jesus's remark about the wind blowing where it will (3:8). The natural image recalls traditional proverbs, and the observation that one can hear but not see the blowing wind could serve as a reminder about the mysteries of ordinary life expected from a Qoheleth or Ben Sirach. But the *pneuma* evoked by Jesus is of a different order, which remains opaque to Nicodemus, whose last words in this episode are "how can these things be?" (3:9). Understanding and accepting the Spirit that comes from Jesus's life, death, and resurrection is an important lesson for the gospel's reader.<sup>23</sup> It is a message that this Pharisee, at least in chapter 3, does not comprehend.

After his baffling nocturnal conversation with Jesus, Nicodemus fades into the background, only to reemerge twice at critical points in the narrative, with the high priests and Pharisees at Sukkot (John 7:45–52) and at the burial of Jesus (19:38–42).

21. See the description in Josephus, *J. W.* 1.110: "the Pharisees, a certain class of Jews that is reputed to be more observant than the others and is thought to interpret the laws with greater precision." Similarly, *J. W.* 2.162.

22. As often noted, the language of "kingdom of God" only appears in the Nicodemus episode in the gospel. After this episode the focus shifts to "eternal life." That shift, however, does not seem to have any special connection with Nicodemus.

23. Johannine pneumatology is important, even if not quite in the systematic fashion outlined by Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *John and Philosophy: A New Reading of the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Nicodemus's actions after encountering Jesus have been variously read. It is clear that he did not reject Jesus, despite his puzzlement about rebirth. His discussion with the priests and Pharisees shows him to be a man of principle who will not stand by if people in authority ignore Torah in prosecuting Jesus. Yet his legal objection does not reveal him to be a believer.<sup>24</sup> It is not clear if he ever fully accepted Jesus's message, hence his designation as an "ambiguous" character.<sup>25</sup>

The extravagance of Nicodemus's contribution to Jesus's burial bespeaks some degree of respect or even admiration for the Galilean, but the contribution does not clearly constitute a confession of belief. The narrative is inconclusive. Perhaps readers will find in the luxurious treatment of Jesus's corpse, a burial fit for a king, a sign of faith. Other readers may say, "Thank you, Nicodemus, but you have missed the point. The death of Jesus is not his end; his body need not receive such lavish treatment."<sup>26</sup> Chrysostom read the story in just this way:

For they [viz. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea] still regarded Christ as merely man. Thus, they brought spices which are most likely to preserve the body for a long while and not permit it quickly to become the prey of corruption, a procedure which indicated that they thought nothing out of the ordinary of Him, except that they were displaying very tender affection toward Him [*Hom. Jo. 85*].<sup>27</sup>

We might offer a more positive assessment. The story of Nicodemus and his unguents parallels at the end of the passion account the story of anointing by

24. For a more negative reading, see 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. Reimund Bieringer, Didier Pollefeyt, and Frederique Vandecasteele-Vanneuville, Jewish and Christian Heritage Series 1 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2001), 357–69, and Raimo Hakola, "The Burden of Ambiguity: Nicodemus and the Social Identity of the Johannine Christians," *NTS* 55 (2009): 438–55.

25. Bassler, "Mixed Signals"; Gabbi Renz, "Nicodemus: An Ambiguous Disciple? A Narrative Sensitive Investigation," in *Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John*, ed. Jon Lierman, WUNT 2.219 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 255–83; Susan Hulen, *Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009); Michael R. Whinton, "The Dissembler of John 3: A Cognitive and Rhetorical Approach to the Characterization of Nicodemus," *JBL* 135 (2016): 141–58.

26. For this reading, see T. C. De Kruif, "'More Than a Hundredweight' of Spices (John 19,39 NEB): Abundance and Symbolism in the Gospel of John," *Bijdragen* 43 (1982): 234–39.

27. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Saint John the Evangelist and Apostle: Homilies 48–88*, trans. Sr. Thomas Aquinas Goggin, SCH (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1960), 437.

Mary of Bethany at the beginning (John 12:1–8). The amount of ointment there, merely a liter, was much smaller, but it was also very valuable (12:3: *νάρδου πιστικῆς πολυτίμου*). Thus both Mary and Nicodemus engage in extravagant acts that focus on Jesus's death. The story of the earlier anointing in its context complemented the presentation of Lazarus's resuscitation in chapter 11. John thus suggests that the two sisters' confessions about Jesus as the source of resurrection were incomplete without an acknowledgment that the path to resurrection was the way of the cross. The story of Nicodemus provides an inverse parallel. Without the perspective of the next chapter, abundant anointing is merely an act of extravagant piety. For the evangelist, the reality of the cross needs the hope of Easter as much as the joy of Easter needs to be grounded in the reality of the cross.

As so often in the gospel, the rhetoric is open-ended and subject to different construals. At the least one can say that the evangelist prevents a simple condemnation of Nicodemus as a Pharisee. For John, as for Acts, being a Pharisee and a Jewish leader is not incompatible with sympathy for Jesus and his message. Within the context of the gospel's rhetoric, the Nicodemus episodes function as a critical counterpoint to the dominant theme of the hostility of the "Jews" and the Pharisees to Jesus. The story makes the point that some leaders of the Jews, some Pharisees, were sympathetic enough to Jesus to defend him and participate generously in his burial. The message to the readers: be open to them; help them to come to full belief and "rebirth."

#### FOILS FOR JOHANNINE THEMES

A brief review of how Nicodemus balances the Pharisees' hostility elsewhere in the gospel shows that Nicodemus, though an ambiguous character, invites readers to think that Pharisees are not a lost cause and that being born *ἄνωθεν* ("again" or "from above") is a possibility even in difficult cases. Other Pharisees provide Jesus occasions to make additional important points. A significant instance, relying on the reputation of the Pharisees as skilled in the law, appears in the dialogue at Sukkot in John 8:13 after Jesus claimed to be the Light of the World. The Pharisees say his claim cannot be true because Jesus is testifying to himself. This charge had already been leveled against Jesus, though not specifically by Pharisees, after he healed the paralytic (John 5:31). There Jesus responds by pointing to others who testified to him: John the Baptist, the Scriptures, and the Father who sent him. Yet there is irony in Jesus's denial since he immediately goes on (5:32) to claim that he knows that the Father's

testimony is true and thus indirectly testifies to himself. The ironic tension reappears in chapter 8.

In chapter 5, Jesus agreed with the Pharisees' argument that, if he testified for himself, his testimony would not be true (5:32). Here he argues, counterfactually, that were he to testify about himself, his testimony would be true, because it is grounded in what he knows. As the story develops, making much of such forensic categories,<sup>28</sup> Jesus's role as a witness continues to develop. Finally, before Pilate, confronted with the charge that he claims to be king, Jesus responds with the solemn declaration that he came into the world for one purpose, to bear witness to the truth.

Appearing briefly at 8:13, the Pharisees move the complex thematic development ahead. There is tension between what Jesus says in chapter 5 and in chapter 8 about his testimony, but unpacking the tension is essential to seeing the Johannine point. Were Jesus simply making claims about himself (as Bultmann's reading suggests), then he would be unworthy of belief. Yet he *is* bearing testimony to himself not as someone to be respected in an ordinary human way. Rather, he testifies to himself as the embodiment of a principle that all are called to accept, a principle that is the truth of human existence. The evangelist is not particularly concerned at 8:13 about what the Pharisees might say about legal testimony. He is on his way to making his case for what Jesus really claims about himself, about God, and about human existence.

The second major context in which the Pharisees serve as foils for the gospel's claims is the healing of the man born blind in chapter 9. After his healing, the man is brought to the Pharisees. The pretext for this move is that the healing took place on the Sabbath, like the healing of the paralytic in John 5. The Pharisees' reputation as strict Sabbath observers, well attested in the Synoptics, lies in the background. What follows the man's interrogation (9:15) is analogous to what apparently went on in Nicodemus's mind—division. Some say that a Sabbath breaker cannot be a man of God; others say that a sinner could not perform such a healing. The focus on the Pharisees is lost as the story develops and attention shifts to “the Jews” as the main opponents. By the end of the story, however, the Pharisees return to ask Jesus sarcastically if they are blind. As often, sarcasm contains a deeper truth: Jesus tells them that if they were blind, in a physical sense, they would be without fault, but because they claimed to be “sighted,” to be able to see the work of God in their midst, their

28. On the “trial” motif, see Andrew Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), and George Parsenios, *Rhetoric and Drama in the Johannine Lawsuit Motif*, WUNT 1.258 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

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sin remains. The implication of Jesus's comment for one of the gospel's larger themes is significant. The Pharisees who have objected to his healing have made a choice, and their failure to choose correctly is a sin.<sup>29</sup>

The position of the Pharisees at the end of John 9 is quite different from that of Nicodemus at Jesus's tomb. They have made their choice, determined what it is they love, and it is not what they see in Jesus. But as the case of Nicodemus demonstrates, such a choice is not inevitable, not predetermined. Anyone, even a Pharisee, can have eyes opened and learn, however reluctantly, to see and react appropriately.

29. On this theme, see Harold W. Attridge, "Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility in the Fourth Gospel," in *Revealed Wisdom: Studies in Apocalyptic in Honour of Christopher Rowland*, ed. John Ashton, Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity 88 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 183–99.