

## Introducing Nicodemus – the richest man in Jerusalem?

JCV Integrated Text: **John 3:1**

Now there was a man of the Pharisees called Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

### Introduction

At the end of the last section we saw Nicodemus introduced in **John 3:1** as “a man of the Pharisees, called Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews”. In this session we don’t introduce any more Biblical text but will look more at his background from other historical writings.

We will cover his dialogue with Jesus in the next two sessions.

### Nicodemus in John’s Gospel

Nicodemus is not mentioned in the synoptics but is a key eyewitness in **John’s** gospel. He first appears in the third chapter as a rabbi in the Pharisaic tradition and a member of the Sanhedrin. It is not long after Jesus has cleared the Temple for the first time and he seeks Jesus out for a discussion after sundown, **John 3:1-21**. As tensions rise at the Feast of Tabernacles in the autumn of Jesus last year of ministry, Nicodemus speaks up saying that the Pharisees should listen to what Jesus has to say and what He does before passing judgement on Him, **John 7:50-52**. He appears for the last time three chapters from the end where he helps move Jesus’ body and hastily provides basic spices and grave clothes, **John; 19:38-42**. Again this forms an eye-witness inclusio in **John’s** Gospel.

### Nicodemus’s family

As there isn’t any direct reference to a ‘Nicodemus’ as a Jesus contemporary, apart from **John’s** Gospel to this specific Nicodemus, some scholars think that he wasn’t a historical character. However, research by Richard Bauckham<sup>1</sup> pieces other evidence together to suggest that Nicodemus was part of the Gurion family, the third wealthiest family in Jerusalem which is mentioned in the Talmuds and Rabbinic sources...

**Nicodemus** is a Greek name which means ‘Conqueror of the People’. **Note:** There are many Greek names which appear in Jewish Culture (eg. Andrew and Phillip are Greek names of two of Jesus’ disciples). The name seems to enter Jewish circles with a military leader at the time of the Maccabean expansion of Jewish territory when this earlier Nicodemus, referenced by Josephus (**Antiquities 14.17**), is rewarded with land probably covering most of Judea, Samaria and Galilee - making him exceedingly wealthy. However, he is a bit too early to be a contemporary of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> **Richard** Bauckham, "**Nicodemus** and the Gurion Family", *Journal of Theological Studies* 47.1 (1996):1–37

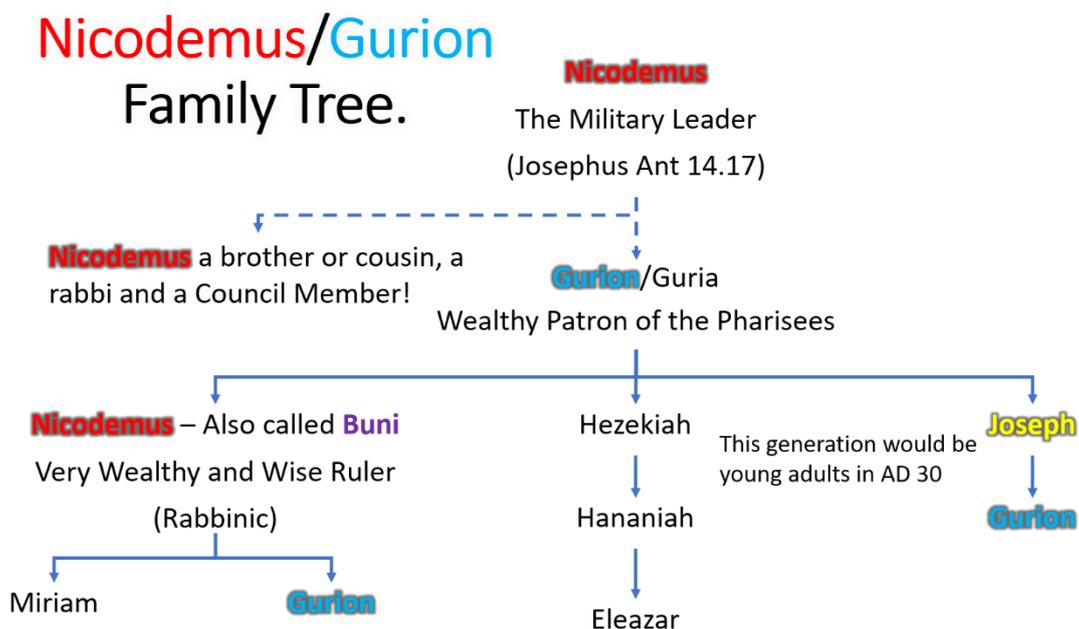
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There is another Nicodemus cited in the Talmud, Nicodemus ben Gurion, who is a bit too late to be a contemporary of Jesus. He is referred to in the legends around the destruction of Temple in Jerusalem in 70AD and is listed as one of the three most wealthy families in Jerusalem.

This suggests that the name ‘Nicodemus’ is a family name being passed down an exceptionally wealthy family so we would expect that there would be a Nicodemus of this family in Jesus’ generation. Since the most common naming convention was to name one’s first son after one’s brother (ie. the child’s uncle), it is likely that Nicodemus of **John 3:1** was Gurion’s brother. Later sons would be named after the Grandfather or other relative.) In ruling families there was a tendency to keep unusual and prestigious family names alive and if a Greek or Latin name was to be used, one would find a name which either sounded similar or had the same meaning.

However, we also know that Gurion was in the generation a bit ahead of Jesus but with a significant overlap and was a wealthy patron of Hillel, the famous Pharisaic Rabbi. He was a supporter of Gamaliel who later trained Paul and hosted Pharisaic gatherings in the family properties around Jericho.

Richard Bauckham, tracing references to Gurion’s family in Rabbinic writing right up to the destruction of Jerusalem, has constructed a family tree (see below):



**Note:** All names on this family tree have been gleaned from diverse Rabbinic writing except the Biblical **Nicodemus** highlighted red.

Bauckham discovered that Gurion also has a son called Joseph (who himself has a son called Gurion - reflecting the tradition of naming after the Grandfather). This raises the possibility that **Joseph of Arimathea** and **Nicodemus** are related! We won’t discuss this possibility in detail until Joseph of Arimathea appears in the Gospel story...

## Nicodemus, the Jewish ruler

Josephus refers to Jerusalem's leading elite as "the Chief priests and the leading men of the Pharisees" (**Life 21**) and puts Gamaliel (**Acts 5:34**) into this group along with his son Simon. He presents a case that, although the Sanhedrin comprises mainly priests, a handful of the wealthiest lay people were considered a part of the Sanhedrin. At the time of Jesus this would include the Gurion and Nicodemus would be there, fitting the description of Nicodemus of **John 3:1** as 'a man of the Pharisees' and 'a ruler of the Jews'.

## An indirect reference in Rabbinic writings?

It is likely that Nicodemus is not mentioned directly by his full name in the Rabbinic writings because he 'defected' and became a Jesus follower. However, the Talmud contains a constructed polemic against a bad Rabbi called "Yeshu" (the disrespectful, diminutive form of Jesus) telling of the execution of 5 disciples based on Scriptural word play on the shortened versions of their names.

The five are:

- **Naqqai = Naqdimon/Nicodemus**
- Mattai = Matthias or Matthew
- Nesar(Nittai) = Nathanael
- Buni = Benaniah? (but the short version is unique to the Gurion family, it may have been a family nickname.)
- Todah(Taddai) = Thaddaeus

'Naqqai' is the diminutive form of Nicodemus' - and 'Jeshu' is the Rabbinic way of making 'Jesus' smaller too!

## Conclusion

Nicodemus in **John's** Gospel is unlikely to be the same Nicodemus cited in the Talmud but is clearly part of this same family. Nicodemus ben Gurion is remembered as thoroughly Jewish, but John's Nicodemus is a public supporter of Jesus by the end, and a willing eye-witness who gets listed as an "executed" disciple of Jesus by later Rabbis. **John's** Nicodemus is not just a patron of the Pharisees - he is a Rabbi in his own right (**John 3:10**) and senior enough in the family to be part of the Sanhedrin.

Now we are set to look at the Rabbi to Rabbi conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in our next two sessions!