

The Serpent and the Shadow

A Portrait of Nicodemus

Author's note

Nicodemus is one of the most shadowy figures in the New Testament. He appears only three times, all of them in the Gospel of John (3,1-21; 7,45-52; 19,38-42) and there are no reliable extra biblical sources about him. Even so, what we do know is remarkable: he is a Pharisee, a rabbi, truly seeking the Messiah and the Kingdom of Heaven. He stands up for Jesus before the Sanhedrin and finally helps bury the true King of the Jews. But amidst this flow of information the man Nicodemus is just a shimmering shade. Who was he? What were his relations, job, tribe? And most important, did he believe? This portrait has tried to capture a picture of this man. Because of the lack of information most of what is written here is fictitious, but the real goal is to draw a picture of Jesus, called the Christ, using the medium of Nicodemus.

Rumors

“**S**HEMA ISRAEL ADONAI ALOHENU ADONAI EHOD.”¹ The quiet rumbling came from deep within the chest of the worshipper as he recited his morning prayers on the roof of his house just before dawn. He wore the robes of a rich man. The phylacteries, the prayer boxes attached to long leather bands, were carefully wrapped around his right arm and forehead. He wore a long prayer shawl on his head, the edges adorned with tassels. He finished his prayers and carefully removed the prayer boxes, putting them back in the pouch he kept them in. After that he left the roof and descended into the rear courtyard, heading for the morning meal.

“Good morning, rabbi!” He waved his hand in half-recognition, pondering on the things in the weeks passed. He pulled on his long, graying beard as he entered the low doorway into the room where the meal was laid out by his servants. He quickly went through the ritual washing before reclining at the table.

“Good morning, Abba²!”

“Eh, what’s that?” He looked up to see his eldest son, Malachi, standing in front of him. “Good morning, good morning.” The father pulled on his beard again. That — that Baptizer, that was what bothered him. The rumors of the Kingdom of Heaven being near.

“Prepare the way!” the rabbi muttered into his beard and got up without having touched any of the food. *Best send someone to check it out.*

“Abba, will you be here when the wares arrive?” Malachi cut into his thoughts.

“Huh? No — no, I need to get to the synagogue. So many questions...” The rest of it was lost in his beard as he walked out of the room.

“GOOD MORNING, RABBI!” THE STUDENTS CALLED as they saw him enter the building. He just waved a hand, pulled on his beard and went towards his customary place.

“Nicodemus!” He looked up and a smile crossed his face.

“Joseph! It has been some time.” He embraced his friend in the customary way and the two of them sat down a bit away from the students, whose constant buzz from reciting made conversation difficult.

“What brings you here?” Nicodemus asked.

“I got a message from some friends concerning the Baptizer.”

“And?”

“Well, we’ve decided to send a delegation down to see them. I wanted to know if you might go along.”

“You’re going?” the rabbi asked his friend.

“Yes, I wouldn’t miss seeing this — this prophet for anything.” Nicodemus pulled on his beard thoughtfully.

“So you think he is a prophet.”

“Yes, and you?”

“I’m not sure ... not sure. There are so many things happening that I don’t know what to do or say. I heard that the Baptizer is proclaiming the Messiah.” Joseph’s dark eyes sparkled as he ran a hand over his short beard.

¹Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one.

²Aramaic for “father”

“He is! Some say that *he* is the Messiah.”

“Hm. I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” the teacher mused. Then he scanned his students.

“Reuel!” One young man with clean, clear features looked up. He couldn’t be much older than nineteen or twenty. He quickly left the circle of students who were gathered around the other rabbi’s feet and stood in front of the two older men.

“Reuel, I want you to go with Joseph and see about the Baptizer. If I know my colleagues,” here he smiled secretly, “they will have already prepared a delegation. You should both join them, but, Reuel, I want you to report back to me *personally*, understood?”

“Yes, Rabbi Nicodemus,” the young man answered, his features fairly glowing with delight. The rabbi dismissed him and turned back to his friend.

“I would like to know your impression also, friend Joseph,” he said in an even tone. “If the Messiah is near, then the days of the Goyim’s³ power over us are numbered!” Joseph smiled, rose, and bid his friend farewell.

“MASTER NICODEMUS.” THE RABBI LOOKED UP FROM HIS SCROLL, irritated. A servant girl was standing there.

“Yes, child, what is it?”

“Reuel would like to see you, sir.”

“Ah, yes.” Nicodemus rose and left the room, walking out into the balmy evening air. He paused and took a look at the house. *Why did Abba have to build this house like the Goyim have theirs?* he wondered again. He would have chosen a place somewhere in the country, away from the sweltering heat of Jerusalem, but as a member of the Sanhedrin and as the only son among nine sisters, he inherited the property and was forced to stay here. Oh well, there were some things in life that wouldn’t change, even *if* the Messiah came.

Reuel was already waiting on the roof of the house for him. Excitement colored his face and he could hardly stand still. Nicodemus motioned him towards a bench of marble that his father had put up here. They both sat down.

“Tell me, Reuel, what happened,” the older man prompted. The young man smiled and began to recount the happenings of the last days.

“We came down to the Bethany beyond Jordan, where the Baptizer was baptizing at the time. There were some priests and Levites along with us. I tell you that man is wild! It is said that he is a Nazarite and you can tell that by the length of his hair! He wore a rough cloak of camel hair and had a thick leather belt around his waist. He looked like someone really wild!”

“Yes, yes,” Nicodemus cut in, “but what about the questions?” The student thought for a moment.

“Ah, right, the priests and Levites asked him who he was. He said that he wasn’t the Messiah. When they questioned him if he was Elijah or the Prophet, he also said no to that. Then they said, ‘Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’⁴

“‘I am the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord,’⁵ was his answer.”

“Isaiah,” Nicodemus muttered into his beard.

“What?”

“Nothing. Go on.”

“After that Simon asked him why he was baptizing if he wasn’t any of those people. He gave a really strange answer.

“‘I baptize with water,’ he said, ‘but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.’⁶ That wasn’t enough for most of us, so we stayed around until the next day. Suddenly the Baptizer pointed to the road, where a traveler was coming along, out of the wilderness. The Baptizer cried out, ‘Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant, when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.’⁷

“So, the Baptizer is preparing the way...” the rabbi mused into his beard.

³Hebrew for “Gentiles”

⁴Jn 1:22

⁵Jn 1:23

⁶Jn 1:24

⁷Jn 1:30-31

“But Rabbi, he wasn’t finished,” Reuel continued excitedly. “He then said, ‘I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, “The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.” I have seen and I testify that this is the son of God.’⁸ That was what he said.” The young man suddenly looked very perplexed. “Rabbi, what did he mean by ‘Son of God?’”

“Hm, someone of close kin to God, for all I can tell,” Nicodemus answered a bit impatiently. “Thank you, Reuel, you may go. I will think about what you have said.” The young man bid his teacher farewell and was escorted out of the large house by a servant. Nicodemus sat until the wee hours of the night, pondering what he had heard from his student. Could it be that the Messiah had come?

Visit by Night

NICODEMUS GRUMBLED TO HIMSELF AS HE LEFT THE SANHEDRIN, constantly pulling on his beard. He only greeted his close friends, before heading towards home. It was that Jesus of Nazareth. The high priests were indignant about what had happened at the temple that morning. Nicodemus had been there. He’d seen the young Man enter, followed by several others and look around the temple. He could see the color rise in the face as an angry frown replaced the smile that had been on the Nazarene’s face only a minute before. Jesus angrily strode into the temple courts and stopped, staring around at the churning, bargaining masses in the Court of the Gentiles. Then the old teacher watched him bend and pick up a piece of rope dropped by one of the merchants. With deft movements the carpenter split open one end of the rope and turned it into a whip. Then he strode up to the table of a money changer, who was just counting out coins for one of the worshippers. Astonishment washed over his face as suddenly the table vanished from in front of him and flew across the way into another one. In an instant the whole court was in confusion as Jesus of Nazareth overturned tables, tore open the pens of sacrificial animals and broke the cages of doves. The whip in his hand whistled over the heads of the animals and they stampeded towards the gates. The Nazarene’s voice thundered through the temple.

“Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market!”⁹ Nicodemus then joined some of the other Pharisees and priests that shouldered their way through the crowds. They halted in front of the angry young Man.

“What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”¹⁰ a priest demanded. Jesus looked at him critically, yet lovingly.

“Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days.”¹¹ Nicodemus couldn’t suppress a smile as he heard another priest’s answer.

“It has taken forty-six years to build this temple and *you* are going to raise it again in three days?!”¹² The crowd dispersed, chuckling at the insanity of this young man, but as Nicodemus walked home from the Sanhedrin, he couldn’t help but admire Jesus. Here was one man who was willing to stand up against the corrupt government of the Sadducees. That was a blow in their face and should put Jesus up several notches in any Pharisee’s rating. The rabbi thought of the rumors of miracles worked by this man. He smiled to himself as he thought of the water turned to wine at Nathanael’s wedding, that Malachi had told him about. There was so much that puzzled him about this man. The Sadducees were after him now, because of what happened at the temple. His teaching alarmed the Pharisees, because he had an authority that came from his very person, not from the ancient rabbis. *I must speak to him*, Nicodemus thought to himself.

“*Shalom*¹³, rabbi,” he heard someone call. Ah, yes there was Nathan, one of his students.

“Nathan,” he called, motioning the young man over towards himself.

“Yes, sir?”

“I want you to do something for me. Will you find out where this Jesus of Nazareth is staying?” Nathan’s eyes grew wide.

⁸Jn 1:32-34

⁹Jn 2:16

¹⁰Jn 2:18

¹¹Jn 2:19

¹²Jn 2:20

¹³Peace be with you. A Hebrew greeting.

“Jesus of Nazareth?”

“You heard me, Nathan, now please go.” The young man gaped at his teacher for another moment, before scuttling off into the crowd. *That’s likely to stir up some questions in him*, Nicodemus thought with a smile.

EVENING FOUND THE RABBI SITTING ON HIS ROOF, looking out over the city. Out there, somewhere Jesus of Nazareth was, with answers to the questions that Nicodemus had. *Could he be the Messiah?* Nicodemus suddenly found himself wondering. *Could it really be that the Kingdom of Heaven is near? How can I enter the Kingdom?* There was only one way to find out. To go out into the shadows and visit Jesus, hoping that no one would notice. If they found out it would cause a stir among his friends, but even if they knew, no one would be able to call him a coward for going when it was dark, him the ultimate night-owl, who had often sat and discussed with Gamaliel until the sun came up. *I’ll go*, he finally decided, but first he changed his rich robes for some simpler ones he kept for traveling. *At least this way I won’t be noticed so easily*. With that he let himself out of a side door and disappeared into the night.

NICODEMUS WAS MORE THAN SURPRISED BY THE YOUNG RABBI, JESUS, SON OF JOSEPH. There was no way to feel disdain for this man who stood before him, with a calm, welcoming gaze. He was dressed in the customary style of Galilee and his callused hands clearly showed that he was used to work. His hair and beard were trimmed short, but still made Nicodemus involuntarily think of the wild Baptizer. It seemed that this man’s mouth was quick to smile and his eyes sparkled in a way that the older man had never seen before. Wisdom was there, also love and knowledge. There was something about him that made Nicodemus instantly wonder, *Could he be the Messiah?* But then he changed his mind. *Even if he is, I’d better be careful. No need in starting any crazy rumors*.

“Rabbi,” he began slowly, “we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”¹⁴ Jesus looked into his eyes gently and smiled. It came easily and strangely warmed the older man’s heart.

“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”¹⁵ Nicodemus suddenly was shocked. *Can he read my mind? What does he mean by born again?*

“How can a person be born when he is old?” Nicodemus wondered, pulling on his beard. “He can’t enter again into his mother’s womb to be born, can he?!”¹⁶ *Preposterous!*

“I tell you the truth,” Jesus continued gently, “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. Don’t be surprised that I said, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases and you can hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.¹⁷ That is how it is with everyone who has been born of the Spirit.¹⁸” The older teacher shook his head and pulled on his beard. *I don’t get this*, he told himself. *How come I can’t get into the Kingdom by the works prescribed by the law? What is all this about being born of the Spirit?*

“How is all this possible?”¹⁹ exploded from him in frustration. Jesus sighed and looked at him a bit sadly and maybe even a bit frustrated.

“You’re *the* teacher of Israel, and yet you don’t understand this?” There was a tone of resignation in the young Rabbi’s voice. “I tell you the truth, *we* speak of things *we* know and testify about what *we* have seen — yet you people still do not accept what we say! I’ve told you about *earthly* things and you don’t believe. How then will you believe if I tell you about *heavenly* things?²⁰” Jesus sighed and continued in a gentler tone, as one used in speaking to a frightened child.

“No one has risen into heaven except the one who *came down from* heaven — the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, in the same way the *Son of Man* must be lifted up. And whoever believes in him

¹⁴Jn 3:2

¹⁵Jn 3:3

¹⁶Cheney, Johnston M. and Stanley Ellisen, Th.D., *The Greatest Story*, Sisters, OR, USA: Multnomah Books, 1994. p. 50

¹⁷Jn 3:5-8a

¹⁸Cheney & Ellisen, *op. cit.*, p. 50

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*

will receive eternal life. For God loved the world so much, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life...”²¹

Defendant’s Counselor

THE MERCHANT’S HOME WAS QUIET and Joseph was almost worried that his friend had died. Still he worked up enough courage to knock on the gate. The door was opened by one of the servants who instantly recognized the rich man from Arimathea.

“*Shalom*, Master Joseph, come in,” the servant said with a bow and the man entered.

“Is your master at home?”

“Yes, sir, he is on the roof of the inner court. Shall I announce you?”

“No, no, I know the way. I need to talk to him privately anyway.” The servant bowed and disappeared into the shadows of the house. Joseph slowly walked through the atrium, as always marveling at the beautiful architecture of the house that Nicodemus’ father had constructed. It was built according to Roman style, but there was nothing unclean to be found here. The hovels that had stood here before were cleared away and the people who lived there had been generously given a plot of land to farm in the hills of Judea that once belonged to Nicodemus’ family. Joseph shook his head. The old man had almost been too generous with his money, so that much of the fortune was gone by the time his friend had inherited it. Oh well, it was still more than enough to exist comfortably.

He climbed the stairs and walked along roof to where he saw a figure leaning on the balustrade, looking down into the courtyard. The man heard Joseph’s quiet footfall and turned suddenly.

“Joseph!” A smile slid across Nicodemus’ face. Joseph’s portrayed shock.

“Nicodemus, what happened to you?” The once almost black beard was now fully gray, his hair had also turned quite gray and was nearing white.

“Oh, its those things that Jesus said to me, Joseph. I can’t get them out of my head and the more I ponder them, the less I sleep and the older I get.” The rabbi smiled again. “It is an intriguing story about what happened. I already told you about the long talk I had with Jesus. Since then I sent Stephen to check out his background and I have been studying the Scriptures. There are many interesting things there, that I hadn’t noticed before about the Messiah. Could it be that the rabbis were wrong...?”

“Wrong about what?”

“About Isaiah. The Son of Joseph, the rejected Messiah.” Nicodemus shook his head. “If only I knew. But listen to what I found out: Stephen reported to me that Jesus wasn’t even born in Nazareth, but in Bethlehem, and according to his mother Joseph Bar-Jacob wasn’t even his physical father. She claims that an angel appeared to her announcing Jesus’ birth and that she would be pregnant as a virgin.” The rabbi pulled on his beard and shook his head again. “I can’t understand it. I wonder if Isaiah was pointing towards something like that when he said that the virgin would be with child. Still, my friend, I shouldn’t worry you with these things. How have you been?” Joseph then told about the last years since he’d seen his friend. Much of what he told was of Jesus.

“So you have been following him,” Nicodemus surmised.

“Yes and no. I am impressed with his teaching.”

“So am I, so am I. It is strange. I have tried keeping some of what he spoke of and it has transformed so many things about my life. I almost feel that I have found peace.”

“One of the most interesting things about him is his attitude towards women.” Nicodemus looked up curiously. “It — he — he treats them like they were equals. They have worth to him, even the prostitutes.” The rabbi began stroking his beard as his friend continued, “I have tried acting that way toward my wife — and it has changed everything between us. At first we just talked, now we speak to each other. I am amazed, but after all these years I’ve realized that I don’t know her. She has so much understanding even in things of the law. God was right when he called her a helper.” Nicodemus shook his head incredulously.

“That can’t be. You can’t give the law into the hands of a woman. She was tempted first. It — it can’t be. And after all, this Jesus, he doesn’t keep the law and the traditions, does he?”

²¹*Ibid.*

“He keeps the law all right, but not the traditions. I see you have been away too long, Nicodemus. You should have heard what he said about the traditions the other day! He said that we annul the law through our traditions.”

“What?!?”

“Yes, for him the traditions don’t have the same position as the law. You know I remember him once saying the he would fulfill the law.” The redness had drained from Nicodemus face again and he suddenly looked very thoughtful.

“I think perhaps you and I should go to the Sanhedrin,” he finally said. “I want to speak with Gamaliel. He often has good insights into things like this.” Joseph nodded and the two men left for the Council chambers.

THE WHOLE PLACE WAS IN AN UPROAR AS THE TWO MEN ENTERED, the members of the High Council loudly discussing among themselves. Joseph and Nicodemus took their places without being noticed and Nicodemus bent towards Gamaliel, the only one who was silent.

“What is going on here?” he wanted to know.

“It’s that Jesus of Nazareth again,” his friend answered. “He has been claiming to be the Almighty himself.” He shook his head. “Preposterous! The things he’s said. Of course you wouldn’t know, you weren’t at the temple yesterday. Caiaphas sent some soldiers to arrest him and bring him here for questioning — and here they come.” Sixteen soldiers marched into the room. Caiaphas leaned forward.

“Well, where is he? Why didn’t you bring him with you?”

“Nobody ever spoke like this man does!”²² the commander answered, staring the high priest into the face.

“What?!?” the shriek came from Caiaphas’ father-in-law Hannas. “Have you, too, been deceived? Have any of the authorities believed in him?”²³

“Have any of the Pharisees?” demanded one of them called Elikam²⁴. “This mob that doesn’t know the law at all is cursed!”²⁵ The color began to rise in Nicodemus’ face. *What is going on here? Are they all possessed? What about the law?* He suddenly stood up.

“Does our law judge a man before first giving him a hearing and learning what he is doing?”²⁶ he thundered into the crowd. He paused for a moment to take a breath. Elikam spun around and leveled a withering gaze at the rabbi.

“You aren’t from Galilee, too, are you?”²⁷ he demanded with biting sarcasm in his voice. “Look into it — no prophet has ever come from Galilee.”²⁷ That made all of the members of the council begin yell at Nicodemus. He stood there, like a sore thumb, face red with anger and eyes flashing. He wanted to tell them that Jesus was right about them, but no — now wasn’t the time.

“Council is adjourned!” Caiaphas thundered over the din. Nicodemus spun around and strode towards the exit. As he passed through the hall to the court, someone pulled on his sleeve. He turned to see Gamaliel. A look of worry was on the face of his friend.

“Are you sure that was so wise, Nicodemus?” he asked.

“Yes.” He was still seething. “Jesus is right. We are all hypocrites. We *don’t* know the Scriptures. Look at what Elikam said to me,” he mocked the nasal voice of his party compatriot, “‘Look into it — no prophet has come from Galilee.’ And what about Jonah and Nahum? ‘Look into it’ indeed.” He shook his head disdainfully.

“Don’t judge them too hard, my friend,” Gamaliel warned. “They were angry.”

“What do you think I am? I wanted to tell them to their faces what I just told you. I’m just too ashamed of being one myself, Gamaliel. I am a hypocrite. I keep the minute details of the law and I don’t care about the people. That is going to change right now, and if it costs me my place in the Sanhedrin. Jesus *is* right!” With that he shook the other rabbi’s hand off his sleeve and stormed out of the courtyard.

Serpent Lifted Up

²²*Ibid.*, p. 123

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴ Elikam means “my God has arisen”

²⁵Cheney and Ellisen, *op. cit.*, p. 123

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷*Ibid.*

The wind whipped through the courtyard. Nicodemus shook his head as he looked around at the house that was his. In the last months he had continued to keep the law *and* the traditions, but with a different view. He tried to also incorporate what he had heard Jesus had said. Love your neighbor as yourself. It was strange how he got to know his servants better. His wife Abigail also noticed how he became more carefree, and though he still kept the law in the most minute detail, he did so not to show off like before, but because he cared. He also showed more care towards his family. He took time to instruct his sons personally when it was needed. He now spent time with his grandchildren, telling them stories. One evening Abigail decided to look him up. He was on the roof again, studying a scroll of Isaiah, as he had been doing so lately. She just stood there for a few minutes. Suddenly he noticed her presence and looked up.

“Hello, Abigail.” She was shocked. For the first time in a long time he had uttered her name. Before it was always “woman” or “wife,” but never “Abigail.”

“Did you want to speak with me?” She nodded. “Come and sit here and talk to me, then.” His voice was gentle, inviting, not at all unpleasant like it had often been. She sat uncomfortably, almost mechanically.

“What’s happened to you, my lord?” she asked.

“What’s happened to me?” Nicodemus smiled. “I have begun following the teachings of *the* teacher of Israel, Jesus of Nazareth.”

“I thought that was you, or Gamaliel.”

“I see, but he has wisdom that I don’t and I still don’t understand a lot of what he has said, but I try to live according to it. But there is one question: Is he the Messiah? What do you think?” Abigail was shocked. Nicodemus had *never* discussed anything even remotely associated with religion with her.

“I — I don’t know,” she finally stammered.

“Neither do I,” he agreed soberly, tugging at his beard. “I wonder ... the serpent lifted up...”

“What?”

“It was something he said to me, about the Son of Man being lifted up, like the bronze snake that Moses lifted up. What did he mean by that.”

“I don’t know, my lord. I don’t understand these things very well, even though I try.”

“You have learned to read, haven’t you?”

“I have, my lord. My father was a priest, as you know.” Nicodemus nodded.

“Then perhaps we should read together, from Isaiah.” He turned towards her and held the scroll so that she could see it. “We all, like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all...”²⁸

The next weeks flew by. Jesus was in Jerusalem again. Nicodemus nearly spent all his time in the temple, listening to him. He watched as Elikam and Gamaliel’s students, along with some of the Herodian party asked whether or not to pay tax. Jesus’ answer impressed him.

“Show me some tribute money. Let me see a denarius.”²⁹ They brought one to him. He took it and turned to the listening crowd.

“Whose image and inscription is this?”²⁹ The answer was instantaneous.

“Caesar’s!”²⁹ Nicodemus saw many of the people spit at the ground as soon as they said the word. Jesus calmly turned to the Pharisees and Herodians.

“Then give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”²⁹ The Sadducees plied him with questions and the Pharisees again and he amazed them with his answers. Nicodemus listened self-consciously as Jesus condemned him and his pharisaic friends. He knew that this man was right. *Lord God Almighty*, the rabbi often prayed. *Change me!*

“I don’t want to be called ‘rabbi’ any more,” he told Joseph one day. “I am not the Messiah, and if *he* is the only Rabbi, then I am not worthy of that title.”

“Whatever you say, Nicodemus,” his friend answered. The days fled by and Nicodemus witnessed again and again Jesus’ wisdom. He thought back to the second time that the man from Nazareth had cleared out the temple. This time had been more thorough than the last, but less violent. He thought back to the days *before* that, when he

²⁸Isa. 53:6

²⁹Cheney and Ellison, *op cit.*, p. 200

had heard the shouts from the streets below and watched the Son of David ride up to the temple mount on the back of a donkey foal. He automatically thought of Zechariah's prophecy. *Strange*, he thought, *how these places from the scriptures come to mind*. He was also shocked at the plans of the Sanhedrin to annihilate Jesus, but he held his tongue. *If they be hypocrites, they be hypocrites*, he decided. *If it comes to a head, I'll defend him again, but no one could kill Jesus. The mob would go crazy*. How wrong he was to be.

"NICODEMUS, NICODEMUS, WAKE UP!" JOSEPH'S FRANTIC VOICE CALLED UP TO THE ROOF. It was the day before Sabbath and they had just enjoyed the Passover, for the first time in the warm company of a real family, where love ruled. Nicodemus was already on the roof. He ran around and looked down to where Joseph was standing.

"What's wrong?"

"The Sanhedrin just condemned Jesus of blasphemy. They've taken him to Pilate."

"What?! Why weren't we called in?"

"They had twenty-three people there already."

"Oh, Lord God Almighty, this can't be happening!" Nicodemus cried. He hurried down the stairs into the courtyard. A servant was already there with a cloak. He motioned the servant.

"Come along, Judah, we will need some help." Then he hurried out of the gate, Judah in tow and the three of them quickly went to Antonia's citadel. Hannas, Caiaphas, Elikam and many of the other radical Jesus opponents were there. Suddenly Nicodemus noticed what Caiaphas was wearing. He was in the full regalia of the high priest, wearing the ephod and the breastplate.

"What is going on here?" he demanded of one of the bystanders.

"He wants to release the 'King of the Jews,'" the man sneered. Suddenly Pilate stepped out of the gate.

"Whom do you want me to release to you? Barabbas, or Jesus, who is called 'Messiah'?"³⁰

"Barabbas!" the crowd suddenly cried.

"Are you mad?" Nicodemus, asked grabbing at the arm of one of the Pharisees, but he ignored the old rabbi, caught up in the frenzy. *What is going on?* Nicodemus wondered, pulling on his beard.

"What shall I do with Jesus who is called 'Messiah,' whom you call 'King of the Jews?'"³¹ Pilate mocked.

"Let him be crucified! Crucify! Crucify him!"³¹ the crowd screamed. Nicodemus could see that the Roman was perplexed. He ran a hand over his sweating brow and didn't even notice as one of his gold rings pinged off the pavement.

"Why, what evil has he done? I don't find that he's done anything deserving death. So after punishing him, I'll release him."³¹ Pilate turned and went back into the castle a short time later he came out.

"Look, I am bringing him out to you so you'll know that I find him not guilty."³² Then two soldiers shoved Jesus out of the door. Nicodemus suddenly felt as if someone was choking him. The Son of Man was dressed in a purple robe, his now long hair matted with blood and spit. A crown of long thorns was on his brow and blood ran down his forehead and face. His hands were tied behind him, so he couldn't reach up to wipe it away. His head was bowed as if under a heavy load.

"Crucify!" screamed the priests and Pharisees. "Crucify!"³³

"Then take him and crucify him yourself. I find him not guilty."³³ Pilate's face showed anger now.

"We have a law and by our law he ought to die," Caiaphas thundered over the din, "because he claimed to be the Son of God."³⁴ *So he called himself equal with God*, Nicodemus thought. Pilate turned around and took Jesus inside. A few minutes later he came back out and sat down on the judgment seat.

"Look at your king!"³⁴ he cried and Jesus was brought out again. The people screamed in anger again. Nicodemus could feel his guts churn as he made out the words.

"Away with him, away with him! Crucify him!"³⁴

"Should I crucify your king?"³⁴ Nicodemus could detect a spark of mockery in Pilate's voice.

"We have no king except Caesar,"³⁴ Nicodemus heard Hannas say. That broke the thread. He tried to push forward to strike the man.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 247

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 248

³²*Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 249

“Blasphemy, blasphemy!” But his cry was lost in the crowd’s affirmation of Hannas’ words.

“I am innocent of the blood of this man,” Pilate snapped in resignation. “You will be witnesses to that fact!”³⁴

“His blood be on us and our children!”³⁴ the people screamed. Nicodemus sadly turned to Joseph.

“The judgment of God has come upon us,” he said to his friend.

“They will probably be taking him to Golgotha,” Judah suggested quietly.

“Then let’s go!” Nicodemus prompted and the servant led the two men through the thronging crowds and out a different gate. They made it there only after they had crucified Jesus of Nazareth. He hung on the cross, clothed only with a loincloth, nails through his wrists, his lower body twisted sideways and knees bent, a single nail through his heels. Above his head hung the sign: “This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”³⁵ Jesus raised his head slightly and it seemed to Nicodemus that Jesus was looking straight towards him.

“Oh, the Serpent!” he cried as for an instant the cross and the man on it transformed into a long pole with a bronze serpent wrapped around it. *He is the serpent now!* Nicodemus said to himself. *He is the King of the Jews and the Messiah!* He turned and repeated his words to Joseph.

“That is true, my friend,” he answered. Then Nicodemus took hold of his expensive robes and tore them. Joseph and Judah looked at him shocked, but understood what he meant and tore their own robes.

A King’s Burial

THEY STOOD BENEATH THE CROSS, listened to the people mock Jesus, the Messiah, laugh at him and call him to come down and yet he was silent to all of their words. He spoke quietly. They were too far away at first to understand him, but edged their way closer until they were just beneath the cross itself. Suddenly the sky went black as night. About three hours later Jesus turned his tortured face towards the sky. Nicodemus, Joseph, and Judah stood, transfixed with horror as the Son of Man cried out in an unearthly voice.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”³⁶ Nicodemus heard Elikam snicker.

“Listen, he’s calling Elijah.”³⁷ It was all Nicodemus could do to contain his rage. Judah couldn’t, turned around and was about to slam his fist into the Pharisee’s blaspheming mouth, but Joseph caught his arm before he could do anything.

“I am thirsty,”³⁸ came a quiet, sad voice from the cross. Judah suddenly turned and ran to a jar of sour wine that was standing there. He soaked a sponge in it, put it on a stalk and held it up to Jesus’ lips.

“Let him drink,”³⁹ he said to Nicodemus and Joseph.

“We’ll see if Elijah comes to take him down and save him,”⁴⁰ Elikam continued to mock. Jesus finished his drink and held his head high again.

“It is finished!”⁴¹ he cried triumphantly and then more quietly added with a bowed head, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”⁴² And after saying these words, he yielded up his spirit. Nicodemus turned to Joseph.

“My friend, it is time to step out of the shadows and into the light! The King needs a proper burial.” Joseph nodded.

“YOU GET THE SPICES, I’LL TAKE CARE OF PILATE AND THE BURIAL CLOTH. Oh, and my own new grave is down there in the Garden. We’ll put him in there.” Nicodemus agreed and headed off into Jerusalem. The sky was light again as he finally found a spice seller.

“We need a lot of spices for him, go get someone to help you carry them,” he said to Judah and then turned to the salesman. “I want seventy-five pounds of the finest myrrh and aloes.” The man looked at him, amused.

“You must be planning to bury a king,” he commented with a laugh.

³⁵Jn. 19:19

³⁶Cheney and Ellisen, *op. cit.*, p. 253

³⁷Mk. 15:35

³⁸Jn. 19:28

³⁹Cheney and Ellisen, *op. cit.*, p. 253

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹*Ibid.*

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 254

“He was more than a king,” Nicodemus replied. At that moment Judah returned with his brother Elhanan⁴³. Together they shouldered the heavy sack full of spices and then followed their master out the gate toward the hill and the tomb. When they reached it, Joseph was already there with the permission to have Jesus’ body.

“We had better make sure he’s really dead,” the centurion just said to the man from Arimathea and motioned one of his legionaries over. He took his spear and jabbed it into Jesus’ side. Blood and water poured out of the wound, making Nicodemus want to vomit. The centurion nodded to his men, who took the body from the cross. They carefully prepared it for burial, wrapping a long strips of linen cloth around and around the body of Jesus, the Messiah. The seventy-five pounds of spices were spread between the cloth, before Elhanan and Judah carefully picked the body up and carried it towards the tomb.

“We must hurry,” Joseph commented. “It will be dark soon.” Nicodemus nodded. There were several women following them. They let them come as they entered the large tomb and placed Jesus’ body in a little depression near the back. There were two blocks of stone next to the depression. Then they went out and the four men pushed at a large round stone, set there to seal the entrance. After some blowing the stone rumbled forward and dropped into a depression in front of the entrance, sealing the Son of Man off from the land of the living.

Epilogue: The Appearance

“**H**e is risen!” Nicodemus couldn’t believe his ears.

“What did you say?” he demanded to the young man who was standing in front of his door. It was Nathanael, a friend of Malachi.

“Jesus is risen, we have seen him. He has called all his disciples to come to Galilee.” Nicodemus half turned into the house.

“Get ready, Abigail,” he said to his wife, who was standing behind him. “I want to see the Messiah one more time before I die!” Since the day that he had rolled that stone in front of the grave, his health hadn’t been the best. The news of the empty tomb now rocked the whole city. Nicodemus had left the Sanhedrin at his own wish, but he knew what the chief priests and Pharisees would do. They would try to make the whole thing look like a lie. He smiled to himself. Now he would see the Messiah.

Several days later he saw the risen Son of Man, who is the Son of God, with his own eyes, along with about 500 other believers in the Messiah. He saw, because he had already believed. He also witnessed the remarkable feast of Pentecost and was baptized in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Nicodemus understood this truth:

Jesus also performed many other miracles in his disciples’ presence that are not written down in this book. But these have been written, so you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

— John 20:30-31 according to the translation of Cheney and Ellisen

⁴³ Elhanan means “God is merciful”

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