

John 11:45-57: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] John chapter 11 verses 45 to 57. Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, You know nothing at all, nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.

He did not say this of his own accord. But being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

So from that day on, they made plans to put him to death. Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples.

[1 : 0 5] Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. They were looking for Jesus, and saying to one another as they stood in the temple, What do you think, that he will not come to the feast at all?

Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know so that they might arrest him. The conclusion of John chapter 11 is a key turning point within the narrative of the gospel.

Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead, and many of the Jews who had gone to mourn with Mary and Martha had seen this, and come back believing in him. Others went and told the Pharisees, This was a cause of great concern.

As Jesus was gathering a following, it was a threat to the authorities and their rule of the people. As Jesus' works become more and more remarkable and undeniable, he becomes a much greater threat.

Jesus had already caused a stir in Jerusalem at a number of feasts, and they would not be surprised if he caused another stir in the Passover that was coming up. The gathering council may not be an official meeting of the entire Sanhedrin, however whether it's an official assembly or not, many of the members of the Sanhedrin are gathering together to deliberate about what to do with this man Jesus.

[2 : 1 7] In the following chapter, in verses 10 to 11, they ended up planning to kill Lazarus as well. So the chief priest made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him, many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

In verse 17 of that chapter, the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. The leaders went on to complain that the whole world was going after Jesus.

The raising of Lazarus was such a remarkable miracle that it was very hard for people to avoid Jesus' glory. It had been manifest, and the manifestation of that glory set in motion the events that would lead to his death.

In the Synoptic Gospels, the plot to kill Jesus is seen to arise more from the conflicts and antagonisms of Holy Week. However, in John's Gospel, there have already been several attempts to take Jesus' life.

After the raising of Lazarus, though, those plans become more formalized and determined. The fact that the galvanization of the plots to take Jesus' life occurs after the raising of Lazarus perhaps can be understood in the light of Jesus' statements in chapter 15.

[3 : 20] Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. The Pharisees and chief priests are concerned that if they don't deal with him immediately, they are going to be in real trouble, not merely because they will lose their religious influence over the people, but also because in losing that influence, the people will become more restive, and there will be a threat of rebellion against the Romans.

If this were to take place, they fear that the Romans would come and take away their place, the temple, and their nation. They would lose both their sanctuary and their national status. The thing that animates them to crucify Jesus, of course, is something that happens to the nation about 40 years later.

Although they tried to escape it in part through the crucifixion of Jesus, is ultimately this that will lead to them losing their place and nation. In the Gospels, we discover just how much they were enthralled to the Romans when in response to the announcement that Jesus is the king of the Jews, they declared that they have no king but Caesar.

Their concern to hang on to their nationhood and the temple at all costs actually led them to forfeit everything else, and they ended up losing the very things that they should have guarded most jealously. For the sake of political expediency, they rejected the Messiah that was sent to them.

The statement that Caiaphas was high priest that year has led some commentators to suggest that John was ignorant of Jewish custom. High priests were generally high priests for life, not just for a period of a single year.

[4 : 41] However, it is far more natural to read this as a statement that Caiaphas' high priesthood happened to contain within it that most significant of years. There is no reason to read this as suggesting that he was high priest only for that year.

Caiaphas reasons by political expediency. The threat of Jesus' growing influence should be answered by putting him to death. By this means he would be an effective scapegoat. If they speedily put him to death, the whole nation could be spared.

Far better to take his life as soon as possible and save the nation than to allow his movement to gather further momentum and jeopardize the entire people. There is a profound irony in what Caiaphas says, although he is the ringleader of the conspirators.

In the very words in which he lays out the plot, he unwittingly describes the salvation that Christ will bring about. For John, this is not just accidental irony. He sees the hand of the Holy Spirit, as Caiaphas is the high priest, causing him to utter a statement that means more than he understands.

The deliverance that Christ will offer to the nation is from an enemy far more pervasive and powerful than the Romans, from Satan and from the power of sin itself. In John's theology, Jesus does in fact die for the nation of Israel.

[5 : 50] The faithful people of Israel are gathered together as a flock under him as the good shepherd. And not just the faithful people of Israel, but also the children of God who are scattered abroad, so that they might become one flock under one shepherd.

Theirs will not merely be a spur-of-the-moment attempt to stoning, but is a cunning plot to take his life at the most carefully considered time. Knowing that they seek to take his life, Jesus no longer walks openly among them.

However, the Passover will be the next natural time when he would be in Jerusalem, and when the Passover comes and people are heading towards Jerusalem, they naturally speculate about whether Jesus will be there for the feast, as he has been on previous occasions.

While Jesus' life had been in danger in going to Jerusalem before, in chapter 7 for instance, now the authorities were far more determined to capture him. They were actively looking for informants to tell them about his whereabouts.

These narratives don't come in the form of atonement doctrines for the most part. Rather, we have to deduce some sort of understanding of what Jesus' death achieves from the actual story. What can we learn from this chapter and the way that Jesus' death is described in relationship to Lazarus and then also in relationship to the nation of Israel and the children of God throughout all of the world?

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