…To Bury Caiaphas, Not to Praise Him
David Flusser

At the end of December, 1990, one of the most significant New Testament-related archaeological discoveries ever made came to light in Jerusalem: the tomb of Caiaphas, high priest in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' death. Some of the ossuaries found in the tomb were inscribed with the name "Caiaphas," the most magnificently decorated of them was inscribed with the name "Joseph bar Caiaphas."

Caiaphas[1] is the most prominent Second Temple-period Jewish personality whose ossuary and remains have been discovered. I have used the occasion of this discovery to discuss Caiaphas' personality and place among the high priests, and to explain some of the background to his fateful decision to eliminate Jesus and his disciples.[2] A careful reading of the gospel reports shows that the involvement of this high priest[3] in handing Jesus over to the Romans and persecuting his disciples was more decisive than it is commonly believed.

Both rabbinic sources and the recently discovered ossuaries show that the name Caiaphas was the designation for this whole family. The Tosefta speaks about the house of *Caiapha* (m. Yevamot 1:10), and Josephus refers to Joseph surnamed Caiaphas (*Antiq*. 18:35, 95). The surname קיפא/קפא (*kayafa*, *Caiapha*) appears on two of the ossuaries discovered in the tomb, and one of these is inscribed with the name יהוסף בר קיפא/קפא (*yehosef bar kayafa*, Joseph bar Caiapha).[4]

The family came from בית מקושש (*bet mekoshesh*, Beth Mekoshesh), a village in the vicinity of Jerusalem. This clan of high priests were descendants of the second wife of a family member from a levirate marriage. One of the family members, Elionaeus, the biblical אליהועיני (*elyeho'enai*)[5] was appointed high priest in approximately 44 C.E. by King Agrippa I.[6] Thus, two high priests are known who belonged to the Caiaphas family, the earlier one being Joseph (18-36 C.E.). It is even probable that the high priest Elionaeus was the son of Joseph Caiaphas.

Joseph's Promotion

Detail of the head of Caiaphas from a fresco in the Arena Chapel at Padua, Italy, painted by the Italian artist Giotto between 1303–1305 C.E.

Was this priestly family important before Joseph's appointment to the highest task in Israel? Did he become high priest because he was born into one of the distinguished priestly families, or was there another reason for his precipitous promotion?

Annas (Hanan) the son of Sethi was the founder of an important dynasty of high priests. Josephus writes: A cause for Joseph Caiaphas' advancement could have been his marriage to the daughter of Annas, the head of a powerful high-priestly clan. This connection is reported only by the gospel of John (18:13), which is not completely reliable as an historical document. Nevertheless, I tend to accept John's statement that Annas was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, and to believe that Joseph Caiaphas became high priest because he married Annas' daughter.[7]

It is said that the elder Ananus [Annas] was extremely fortunate. For he had five sons, all of whom, after he himself had previously enjoyed the office for a very long period, became high priests of God — a thing that had never happened to any other of our high priests. (*Antiq.* 20:198, Loeb ed.)

Annas was appointed by the Roman prefect Quirinius and held this office from 6 to 15 C.E. when he was deposed by the prefect Valerius Gratus. Thus, when Joseph Caiaphas was the high priest (18-36 C.E.), Annas was no longer active as high priest, but still manipulated the power behind the "throne."[8]

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A together in John 18:13-24.

Aramaic inscription on a marble plaque, which at one time had been affixed to the new tomb in Jerusalem of King Uzziah of Judah. The inscription reads: "Here were brought the bones of Uzziah, King of Judah. Do not open." Dimensions: 34 cm. wide x 35 cm. high x 6 cm. thick.

The clan of Annas without doubt belonged to the Sadducean party.[9] This is

explicitly stated in Acts 5:17, which refers to "the high priest and all who were with him, that is, the party of the Sadducees." Also, Annas the Younger, the son of our Annas, "followed the school of the Sadducees" (Josephus, *Antiq*. 20:199). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that other members of the family, if not the whole clan, were Sadducees.

Josephus, in speaking of the younger Annas' affiliation to the Sadducees, says that they "are indeed more heartless than any other Jews when they sit in judgment" (*Antiq*. 20:199; cf. also *Antiq*. 13:294). In the Babylonian Talmud and the Tosefta there is a list of woes caused by high-priestly families. One of these is: "Woe unto me because of the house of Hanin, woe unto me for their calumnies" (Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 57[a]; Tosefta, Menahot 13:21). The house of Hanin, a reference to the mighty family of Annas, is accused of calumnies, and one could easily include among these calumnies the persecution of Jesus and his first disciples, in which Caiaphas also played a decisive role.

The New Testament indicates that those who were active in delivering Jesus to Pilate were members of the high-priestly aristocracy. A further conclusion is almost inevitable, namely, that the leading figures in this fateful action were Annas and his clan together with Joseph Caiaphas, probably his son-in-law.[10]

Jesus Versus the High Priest

In the first three gospels, the "high priests" are presented as the main enemies of Jesus. The plot to kill Jesus is described there as follows:

Now the feast of Unleavened Bread drew near, which is called the Passover. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to put him to death; for they feared the people. Then Judas called Iscariot went away and conferred with the chief priests and captains how he might betray him to them. And they were glad, and engaged to give him money. So he agreed, and sought an opportunity to betray him to them in the absence of the multitude. (Luke 22:1-6, *RSV*)

And when Jesus was finally arrested, "they seized him away, bringing him into the high priest's house" (Luke 22:54). There, in Caiaphas' house, Jesus passed the night in custody, and the men who were holding Jesus mocked him (Luke 22:63).

The interrogation took place the next morning, and it was the high priest Joseph Caiaphas who asked Jesus the decisive question: "Are you the Messiah?" (Matt. 26:62-64; Mark 14:60-62). When he was turned over to Pilate, "the chief priests accused him of many things" (Mark 15:3; Matt. 27:12), and when Pilate offered to release Jesus, "the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead" (Mark 15:11; Matt. 27:20).

The first three gospels do not explicitly indicate the cause of the hatred of those who delivered Jesus to death. One can only guess why the temple hierarchy feared this prophet from Galilee, and why they did everything they could to get rid of him. Jesus' presence in Jerusalem at Passover apparently represented a clear threat to them.

The aim of Jesus' pilgrimage to Jerusalem was neither to perform miracles nor to agitate against the Roman occupation, but he conceived his task as similar to that of Jeremiah at the close of the First Temple period, namely, as a prophet of doom to warn the people of the future destruction of the temple (see, for instance, Luke 21:5-6).[11] He described the temple as "a den of robbers" and began to drive out those who did business there, but even so, the temple authorities seem to have been powerless to stop him, "for all the people hung upon his words" (Luke 19:45-48).

Jesus' parable of the Vineyard and the Tenants (Luke 20:9-18, and parallels) was clearly directed against the priestly establishment: "He [God] will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard [Israel] to others." The "scribes and the chief priests" understood well the threat, and

…tried to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people; for they perceived that he had told this parable against them. So they watched him, and sent spies who pretended to be sincere, that they might take hold of what he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor. (Luke 20:19-20, *RSV*)

Although Jesus did not fall into their trap, he was finally betrayed by one of his own disciples, arrested, and brought to Caiaphas' house.

Heartless Sadducees

The fear of Jesus' opponents was not the only cause of the tragedy; it was also conditioned by their group disposition. They were Sadducees, and as we have seen, Josephus depicts them as "more heartless than any other Jews when they sit in judgment." Concerning the high-priestly clan of Annas to which Caiaphas also belonged, we noted above a woe that mentions the venomous intrigues of that family. History teaches that those who are accused of acting viciously do not commonly respond with repentance. On the contrary, they generally become even more obstinate, and react to the accusations by refusing to change their ways. This is what happened to Jesus' adversaries.

At the beginning of the community of Jesus' disciples in Jerusalem, "the priests and the Sadducees came upon them and arrested them" (Acts 4:1-3). We have already mentioned the list of these opponents in Acts 4:6, "who were all of the high-priestly family," Caiaphas being among them. Later, the apostles were again arrested by Caiaphas "the high priest and all who were with him, that is, the party of the Sadducees" (Acts 5:17-18, 21). "And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest [Caiaphas] questioned them, saying, 'We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us'" (Acts 5:27-28, *RSV*).

Thus, according to the Book of Acts, Caiaphas recognized very well the danger menacing him and his friends when Jesus' disciples preached the new faith. In recounting the life and martyrdom of their Lord, Jesus' disciples could not avoid mentioning the guilt of the Sadducean high priests who had delivered Jesus to the Romans. In the eyes of Caiaphas, by preaching this message to the people, Jesus' disciples were attempting to make the high priests responsible for Jesus' death.

In contrast to what we know about Caiaphas and his faction, especially from John 11:47-53, the Pharisees of his time did not launch persecutions of Jewish prophetic movements. This is attested by Jesus himself (Matt. 23:29-31), according to whom the Pharisees of his day used to say, "If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets." Indeed, when one reads the gospels critically, one becomes aware that the Pharisees did not play a decisive role in Jesus' arrest, interrogation and crucifixion.[12] The Pharisees are not even mentioned by name in the context of Jesus' trial as recounted in the first three gospels, with the exception of the story about the guard at Jesus' tomb (Matt. 27:62).[13]

When the Sanhedrin wanted to put Jesus' disciples to death, the disciples' lives were saved by a Pharisee called Gamaliel, "a teacher of the Torah held in high regard by all the people" (Acts 5:34), in other words, Rabban Gamaliel the Elder. The Pharisees evidently disagreed with the action taken by the high priests against Jesus because, according to their halachah, handing over a Jew to a foreign authority was a sin that could not be forgiven.[14] One can even assume that to the Pharisees the whole affair was further proof of Sadducean cruelty, and that the Pharisees' criticism only increased the Sadducees' persecution of Jesus' disciples.

A similar clash between the Pharisees and Annas the Younger, probably the brother-in-law of Caiaphas, took place in the year 62 C.E. Annas the Younger "convened the Sanhedrin of judges and brought before them a man named James, the brother of Jesus who was called Christ, and certain others [probably Christians]. He accused them of having transgressed the Torah and delivered them to be stoned"

(*Antiq*. 20:200-203). The Pharisees, who Josephus describes as the "inhabitants of the city who were considered the most tolerant and were strict in the observance of the commandments," managed to have the high priest Annas the Younger deposed from his position as a result of the illegal execution of James.

John's View

All four gospels describe the decisive role of the high-priestly group, and especially of the high priest Caiaphas, in the tragedy of Jesus, and also agree that Jesus' opponents feared him. However, only John clearly states the historical circumstances of Caiaphas' fear:

So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council, and said, "What are we to do? For this man [Jesus] performs many signs. If we let him go on thus, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation."

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all; you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish."

He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation. (John 11:47-51, *RSV*)

It is not clear to what degree this report was molded by John or his source. Although the statement that if many believe in Jesus "the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation" may be late, it is well known that in Caiaphas' time prophecies of doom about the future destruction of the temple already existed;[15] one of them was uttered by Jesus himself.

It is very probable that Caiaphas decided to act because he feared that Jesus' movement and its possible success among the people would cause violent Roman intervention. Caiaphas' anxiety was exaggerated, but not unfounded. Roman military forces not only fought against Jewish rebels, but they also crushed any enthusiastic Jewish prophetic movement whose aim was the freedom of Israel. The leader of one such movement, Theudas, is mentioned in Acts 5:36. Josephus described his career:

[He] persuaded the majority of the masses to take up their possessions and follow him to the Jordan River. He stated that he was a prophet and that at his command the river would be parted and would provide them an easy passage…. Fadus [Roman governor of Judea in 44-46 C.E.]…sent against them a squadron of cavalry. These fell upon them unexpectedly, slew many of them and took many prisoners. Theudas himself was captured, whereupon they cut off his head and brought it to Jerusalem. (*Antiq.* 20:97-99, Loeb ed.)

When Felix was the governor of Judea (52-60 C.E.),

…deceivers and impostors, under the pretense of divine inspiration fostering revolutionary changes, persuaded the multitude to act like madmen, and led them out into the desert under the belief that God w g this as but the preliminary to in a large number to the sword. (*W*

The entrances of Loculi II (on the left) and I, in the west wall of the Caiaphas tomb.

Felix anticipated the attack of a similar prophet of Egyptian origin, meeting

him and his followers with Roman heavy infantry. "The outcome of the ensuing engagement was that the Egyptian escaped with a few of his followers; most of his force were killed or taken prisoners" (*War* 2:261-263, Loeb ed.). Paul was later mistaken for this Egyptian by a Roman tribune (Acts 21:38).

It is certainly possible Caiaphas' fear that Jesus' activities would lead to similar ends prompted him to arrest Jesus and deliver him to Pilate. However, in order to accomplish this, the high priest needed Jesus' confirmation that he believed himself to be the Messiah (Matt. 26:62-64; Mark 14:61-62). Caiaphas did not receive an explicit confirmation in full, but Jesus' opponents accused him before Pilate: "We found this man perverting our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ a king" (Luke 23:2, *RSV*). Although Pilate, evidently, was not sure that Jesus was a rebel against Rome, he ordered an inscription to be put on the cross accusing Jesus of being "the king of the Jews" (Matt. 27:27; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19).

Returning to the account in John 11:47-51, Caiaphas justified his awful decision by arguing that "it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish" (John 11:50). I personally feel that Caiaphas was capable of arguing in that way: many politicians and rulers before and after Caiaphas have believed that real or assumed expediency outweighs any moral scruple. This way of reasoning and acting was, and is, without doubt, contrary to the Jewish faith's humane approach[16]—but a Sadducean high priest could disagree.

- [1] Two spellings of the name exist: "Caiaphas" and "Kaiaphas." We have used the former, which is common in English translations of the New Testament and in scholarly literature.
- [2] See D. Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem, 1988). About the trial, see there: "The Crucified One and the Jews," 575-587; "A Literary Approach to the Trial of Jesus," 588-592; "What was the Original Meaning of *Ecce Homo*?" 593-603; "Who Is It that Struck You?" 604-609. See also *"Utilitas Crucis"* in E. Bickermann, *Studies in Jewish and Christian History*, Part 3 (Leiden, 1978), 82-138.
- [3] Concerning Caiaphas and his family, see D. Barag and D. Flusser, "The Ossuary of Jehohanah Granddaughter of the High Priest Theophilus," *Israel Exploration Journal* 36 (1986): 39-44; D. R. Schwartz, *Agrippa I: The Last King of Judaea* (Tübingen, 1990), 184-185; E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, 1979), 225-236; J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia, 1989), passim; B.-Z. Rosenfeld, "The Settlement of Two Families of High Priests during the Second Temple Period," *Historical-Geographical Studies in the Settlement of Eretz-Israel*, vol. 2, eds. Y. Katz, Y. Ben-Arieh, Y. Kaniel (Jerusalem, 1991), 206-218, especially 209-218 (Hebrew); M. Stern, "Herod's Policies and Jewish Society at the End of the Second Temple Period," *Tarbiz* 35 (1966): 235-253 (Hebrew), reprinted in *Studies in Jewish History: The Second Temple Period*, eds. M. Amit, I. Gafni, M.D. Herr (Jerusalem, 1991), 180-198 (Hebrew).
- [4] There is no doubt that the original form of the name was Καϊάφας (*Kaiaphas*, Caiaphas) in the New Testament (see F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago, 1961], 37, p. 20), although there exists a variant, Καϊφᾶς (*Kaiphas*, Caiphas). Josephus speaks about him as Joseph *surnamed* Caiaphas (*Antiq.* 18:35, 95). Tosefta, Yevamot 1:10, mentions the "house of Caiapha." Thus, as the "bar Cathros" inscription (see N. Avigad, "Excavations in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, 1969-1971," in *Jerusalem Revealed* [Jerusalem, 1976], 49) shows, the name Caiapha designated all the members of the family. Therefore, Joseph bar Caiapha is the same as Joseph Caiapha (Caiaphas). For examples of similar variants, see M. Stern, p. 191 (n. 75) and p. 192 (n. 83).
- [5] See J. Liver, *Chapters in the History of Priests and Levites* (Jerusalem, 1968), 105 (Hebrew).
- [6] *Antiq.* 19:342; Mishnah, Parah 3:5 and 20:16; and see *Josephus*, ed. L. H. Feldman, vol. 9 (Cambridge, MA, 1965), 398-399, n. b. According to Mishnah, Parah 3:5, this high priest belonged to the family of Caiaphas, while Josephus (*Antiq.* 19:342) speaks about "Elionaeus the son of Cantheras." The Cantheras family, evidently, is to be identified with the house of Cathros. Thus, there is a clear discrepancy between Josephus and the Mishnah, and scholars who believe both witnesses have no choice but to equate the two high-priestly families. However, one should take into account the possibility that Josephus erred by supposing that Elionaeus was the son of Joseph Cantheras. This is the opinion of M. Stern, p. 196 (for an example of a similar error, see

ibid., p. 194, n. 88). In any case, B.-Z. Rosenfeld rightly suggests (p. 218) that the rare name Elionaeus shows that he belonged to the famous priestly family of Pashhur. If Elionaeus was a member of the house of Caiaphas, then the origin of its other members, including Joseph Caiaphas, was Pashhur.

- [7] Concerning the rules affecting the marriage of the high priest, see Jeremias, pp. 154-157. In 1984 the Israel Antiquities Authority acquired the ossuary of a member of Annas' family (see Barag and Flusser [above, n. 3]).
- [8] For the decisive influence of retired high priests, see Jeremias, p. 157.
- [9] See Jeremias, pp. 229-230. In Acts 4:1-2 we read about the arrest of the apostles by "the priests and the Sadducees." The latter were evidently identical with the men of the high-priestly family enumerated in Acts 4:6.
- [10] This conclusion is based mainly upon my interpretation of Acts 4:6.
- [11] If Joseph Caiaphas was indeed a descendant of Pashhur (see note 6 above), then there is an amazing parallel between the behavior of Pashhur, who had the prophet Jeremiah arrested and beaten when he stood in the courtyard of the temple and prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem (Jer. 19:14-20:6), and that of Pashhur's descendant, Joseph Caiaphas, who had Jesus arrested for the same offense.
- [12] See Paul Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus* (Berlin, 1961), 125-126; and A.F.J. Klijn, "Scribes, Pharisees, High-Priests and Elders," *Novum Testamentum* 3 (1959): 259-267.
- [13] See *A Comparative Greek Concordance of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. R.L. Lindsey, vol. 3 (Jerusalem, 1989), 267-269.
- [14] See Seder Olam Rabbah, end chapter 3; the so-called *"Birkat ha-Minim"* in the Eighteen Benedictions; and below, n. 16.
- [15] Compare Josephus, *War* 6:288-315; and Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's prediction of the temple's destruction in Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 39[b]. According to the Talmud, ben Zakkai gave this prophecy forty years before the destruction of the temple.
- [16] See Tosefta, Terumot 7:20. In such cases the Hassidic halachah did not permit any compromise. See W. Bacher, *Die Agada der Palästinensischen Amoräer*, vol. 1 (Strassburg, 1892); reprint published by G. Olms (Hildesheim, 1965), 128, 188-189.