CHAPTER FOUR

THE CHARGE THAT JESUS IS AN ENEMY OF THE JEWISH NATION—JN 11,47-52

The Fourth Gospel speaks of what seems to be an official gathering of the Council (Sanhedrin) only at 11,47ff. The meeting is presided by Caiaphas, the High Priest, and it is at this meeting that Jesus' death is officially decreed. "From that day on they took counsel how to put him to death" (v. 53). The verse recalls Mt 26,4 and Mt 26,1-5 seems to refer to a preliminary meeting of the Council.

Although Jn 11,49-53 cannot be called a "trial" in the strict sense, it takes on the appearance of a Johannine equivalent for the trial before Caiaphas.

We have noted that the trial before Caiaphas is omitted in Jn 18. It is noteworthy that, at the precise moment in which the hearing before Annas, the (omitted) hearing before Caiaphas and the trial before Pilate are about to begin, the evangelist should take care to designate Caiaphas as οὐσίας τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις συμφέρει ἕνα ἄνθρωπον ἀποθανοῦν ὑπὲρ τοῦ λαοῦ—a direct reference to Jn 11,50. It is precisely this counsel which led the High Priests and Pharisees to decree the death of Jesus (11,53). The position of the event recorded in Jn 11,47ff in the Book of Signs, the great theological interest given to the words of Caiaphas, the fact that Jesus' death sentence is pronounced on this occasion and under the leadership and counsel of the High Priest, indicate that Jn intended this meeting of the Council to be the official conclusion of the "trial" of Jesus by the Jews—which is spread over the whole of his public ministry.

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1 Lagrange (ad loc.) calls attention to the absence of the article before συμβολής and concludes that we are not dealing with an official meeting. In the same sense: B. Weiss; Schanz; Bernard (ad 11,47). Loisy (662f), Bultmann, Barrett ("probably") and Brown (441) speak of a convocation of the Sanhedrin, an official meeting.

2 Caiaphas is certainly the central figure of Jn 11,47-53. Even if it is not said that he is presiding the meeting (Schanz, Weiss), this is most probably implied.

3 Cf. Dodd, Hist. Trad., 27.

4 Vs. F. Hahn, who sees the "eigentlicher Prozess der Juden gegen Jesus" as taking place before Pilate (art. cit., 39 and 85).
A) Jn 11,48

V. 48 states that, if Jesus is left unhindered, all will believe on him; as a result, the Romans will come and take away both the Temple (city of Jerusalem) and the nation.

It is not obvious just in what way belief on Jesus should bring about the destruction of the Jewish nation. The commentators are almost unanimous in affirming that Jesus is being represented as a political Messiah by the Jews.7 Were such a Messiah to gather universal support, the Romans would intervene and deprive the Jews of their Temple worship and national existence. These authors give great importance to the role the Romans play in v. 48. The intervention of the Romans must be motivated and the most obvious explanation is to suppose that the Jews are interpreting the messiahship of Jesus as they did at Jn 6,14f. However, such a view of Jesus’ messiahship is far removed from Johannine christology and, even as a misconception of the Jews, is out of place so late in the Gospel (the accusation during the trial before Pilate is a false accusation, the true charge being that Jesus made himself Son of God).9

There is another avenue of approach to Jn 11,48 which, in our estimation, leads to an interpretation which is more in keeping with the intention of the evangelist. Our point of departure is that it is the evangelist who is speaking and who is attributing to the Jews

5 The patristic evidence which supports the omission of πάντες πιστεύουσαν εἰς αὐτόν (cf. M.-E. Boismard, RB 60 (1953) 350f) is far too slight to warrant serious consideration. Internal criticism is also against the omission.

6 Τόπος, especially used as it is in conjunction with ἔδωκα, almost certainly designates the Temple, rather than Jerusalem. Cf. Jn 4,20; Mt 24,15; Act 6,13.14; 7,7; 21,28; 2 Macc 3,12.18.30; 3 Macc 1,9; 2,14 and, especially, 2 Macc 5,19 (ἔδωκα ... τόπος). Most of the commentators incline towards this sense (Bernard, Bultmann, Barrett, Hoskyns, Lagrange, Lightfoot, Brown). The Temple also suits the theological import of the pericope much better. See below.

7 Westcott, Bernard, Bultmann, Barrett, W. Bauer, Lagrange, Loisy, Brown. Hoskyns is more prudent. He writes that “powerful arrogance of this kind (illegitimate assumption of divine authority) must have political results”.

8 Loisy (662) notes that such a representation “déconcerte le lecteur” but adds: “mais il faut bien aboutir à la Passion!”

9 It is wrong to affirm, with Bultmann, that the Jews are here showing the same misunderstanding of Jesus’ messiahship they will show before Pilate. The accusation in Jn 18 is not due to error, but to wilful misrepresentation. To suppose that the Jews are presented as obedient Roman subjects, zealous defenders of the Roman hegemony (Loisy, 663), is to miss the mark completely.