THE PROPHECY OF CAIAPHAS
John xi 47-53

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The passage to be considered, while it purports to recount an historical incident, has also (more Johanneo) theological content. The significance attaching to it in the great argument of the Fourth Gospel is apparent from the position which the evangelist has given to it. In xi 1-44 Christ is set forth as the Resurrection and the Life, who gives life to dead Lazarus. In order to do so, he enters the place where his own life is in danger (xi 8, 16); the evangelist, after his manner, hints that Christ must die in order to give life to men. This theme is elaborated in the discourse, xii 23-33, ending with the words, TOUTO δὲ ἔλεγεν σημαίνων ποιο θνάτω ἐμεῖλεν ἀποθνῄσκειν, and thus the way is prepared for the Passion narrative which is to follow. The intervening passages make the transition. In xi 47-53 Jesus is devoted to death by the authorities of his nation. In xii 1-8 he is anointed for burial. His final triumph (after death) is symbolized by his acclamation as King of Israel, which (says the evangelist) was a tribute to his victory over death in the raising of Lazarus. The short pericôpè, therefore, with which we are concerned, has profound theological significance. It not only establishes the fact that Jesus is to die, but it also states the purpose and the effect of his dying: he dies “to gather into one the scattered children of God.” Similarly in xii 32 by dying Christ will draw all men to himself, and in x 15-16 (by clear implication if not tōtide̓n ver̔bis) he dies to bring in his other sheep, not of this (the Jewish) fold, so that there may be one flock as there is one Shepherd. Our pericôpè therefore brings us near to the centre of Johannine theology. We are in the presence of one of the most characteristic and distinctive ideas of this evangelist, without precise parallel elsewhere in the New Testament.

2 The idea that the great eschatological Event (however conceived) includes the gathering of the people of God (Israel, or the elect) has deep roots; Is. xi 12, xliii 5 et passim, Ezek. xxvii 25, etc., Mk. xiii 27, 2 Thess. ii 1;
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But the words in which this idea is expressed, ἵνα καὶ τὰ τέχνα τοῦ θεοῦ . . . συναγάγῃ εἰς ἑν, (52), are introduced as a corollary to a proposition which is very far from suggesting any such idea: ἐμεῖλλεν Ἰησοῦς ἀποθνῄσκεν ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἔθνους (51). The transitional phrase, οὐχ ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἔθνους μόνου, is palpably designed to give the desired turn—a quite arbitrary turn—to a maxim which is not itself congenial to this evangelist. It is therefore improbable in the extreme that the composition of the pericopé is the original work of the writer who added the corollary (the writer whose theology dominates the whole work). He must be supposed to have received, from some source or other, the account of the prophecy of Caiaphas, and to have turned it adroitly to account by the introduction of the words of verse 52. What then was the source from which he drew this remarkable account? Even the most resolute advocate of the view that John was dependent on the Synoptics will hardly argue seriously that Jn. xi 47-53 is an expansion of Mt. xxvi 3-5, even though that passage contains the name Caiaphas and the words ἐβουλεύσαντο ἵνα . . . ἀποκτείνωσιν, which occur also in John. It seems that we must look elsewhere.

We may first see whether anything can be learnt from the structure or pattern of the passage, assuming that it ended (before it was handled by our evangelist) with verse 51. It has a certain general resemblance to a class of pericopæ in the Synoptic Gospels for which perhaps the best label is Vincent Taylor’s “pronouncement story”, since that is descriptive and comprehensive and begs no question. Like other pericopæ of the class it opens with a concise setting of the scene (συνήγαγον οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ φαρισαῖοι συνέδριον). A brief dialogue follows (47-48), and this leads up to a pregnant saying, (50), to which is annexed an interpretative comment (51). So far, the passage looks like a fairly typical unit of tradition, and it contrasts with this writer’s more usual manner. It would be a reasonable hypothesis that he is here incorporating a piece of tradition more or less as it reached him. This hypothesis must now be tested.

The passage is exceptional in that the pregnant saying is not uttered by Jesus, who indeed is absent from the whole scene. In

but the close connection of this with the death of Christ is specifically Johannine.

1 Cf. Mk. ii 15-17, 18-20, 24-28, iii 31-35, ix 33-35, x 13-16, xii 13-17; Lk. xiii 31-33.