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John

A Commentary

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Toward that end John's account underscores, first, Jesus' command of the entire situation. Although Jesus dies at the hands of Roman power, he is not its victim but superintends the unfolding of the events that lead to his crucifixion. He virtually orchestrates his own arrest (18:1-8),² entrusts the care of his mother to the disciple whom he loved while he is dying on the cross (19:26-27), and even seems to determine the moment of his own death (19:30). John thus narrates what it looks like for a good shepherd to willingly lay down his life for the sheep, keeping the command from the Father to "lay down his life."

Second, this Gospel emphasizes that Jesus' death accomplishes God's purposes. Jesus refuses to wield arms against those who want to arrest him, because he must "drink the cup that the Father has given" him (18:11). Unique to John, Jesus' last words from the cross ("It is finished!") demonstrate that Jesus has brought his work—God's work—to completion. Various passages are cited to show ways in which Jesus' death fulfills Scripture (19:24, 28, 36, 37). Jesus' death is no accident of history, as if he were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. However much the cross attests to the powers of darkness in the world, it also embodies God's life-giving purpose for the world.

Finally, John's account presents Jesus as a king who gives his life for others. In John's Passion Narrative, Jesus' kingly identity is revealed on the cross. Pilate asks Jesus whether he is a king (18:33, 37); Jesus and Pilate converse about the source of their respective powers (18:36-37; 19:10-11). Jesus is mocked as king (18:37, 39; 19:3); Pilate repeatedly presents Jesus to the Jews and all onlookers as "King of the Jews" (18:39; 19:3, 14, 15, 19, 21). While kings have often died in the course of battles in which they seek to defend the lives of their people and to preserve their kingdoms, Jesus exercises his kingly office by preserving the lives of his people through giving his own life, rather than by taking the lives of others. Even in his death, he does not cease to be life for the world (1:4-5; 6:51-55).

18:1-14 Jesus Arrested in the Garden

In the narrative of Jesus' arrest in the garden, there are four main actors: Jesus, Judas, those who come to arrest Jesus, and Peter. Judas ostensibly serves to hand Jesus over to the authorities: the soldiers seize him, but Jesus dictates the action that leads to his arrest. Passively, the soldiers fall to the ground when Jesus identifies himself (18:5-6). Even Judas fades into the background, standing alongside the soldiers, but doing and saying nothing. Except for Jesus, only Peter, Jesus' own disciple, acts—and he acts against

2. Because John's account so emphasizes Jesus' initiative, Moloney (1998a, 129) deems the term "arrest" a misnomer; yet it is clear that Jesus is apprehended by the authorities, or allows himself to be apprehended by them.

the intentions of Jesus and of the Father by striking the high priest's servant with his sword in an effort to prevent Jesus' arrest. But Peter cannot halt the events that Jesus moves forward.

The conflict between Jesus and Peter reveals the difficulty of coming to grips with Jesus' death as the way that God's anointed king brings life to his people (cf. 6:51-60). Even at this point, Peter still fails to grasp the nature of Jesus' kingship. Earlier he had protested against Jesus assuming the role of a servant to wash his feet (13:6-8); now he protests against Jesus giving himself up to the Romans and certain death. Jesus washing his disciples' feet had graphically demonstrated the life of love and service to which Jesus calls his followers; it had also anticipated Jesus' self-giving on the cross: to protest the one is to protest the other. John now depicts Jesus as living out what he had said earlier, "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down on my own" (10:18) and "No one has greater love than this—laying down one's life for one's friends" (15:13). Jesus gives himself over to earthly authorities in order to carry out the will of a higher authority.

[18:1] After Jesus had said these things, he went out with his disciples, across the Kidron Valley, where there was a garden. He and his disciples went into it. 2 Judas, who handed him over,^a knew the place, because Jesus often gathered there with his disciples. 3 So Judas took a band of soldiers and servants of the chief priests and the Pharisees and went there with lanterns and torches and weapons.

4 Since Jesus knew all that was to come, he went out to him and said to them, "Whom are you looking for?"

5 They answered, "Jesus of Nazareth."^b

He said to them, "I am he."

Judas, who handed him over, was standing with them. 6 And when he said to them, "I am he," they all drew back and fell to the ground.

7 So he asked them again, "Whom are you looking for?"

And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth."

8 Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. If, then, you are looking for me, let these people go." 9 This was to fulfill the word that he had said, "Out of those whom you gave to me, I have lost none."

10 Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his right ear. The servant's name was Malchus.

11 So Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into its sheath. Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?"

12 Then the band of soldiers and their captain and the servants of the Jews took Jesus and bound him, 13 and they led him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year.^c 14 It

was Caiaphas who had advised the Jews that it was better that one person should die on behalf of the people.

- a. "Handed over" translates the Greek *paradidous*, from *paradidōmi*; most often this is translated "betrayed." See textual notes at 6:64; 13:2; 18:30; 19:11.
- b. While *Iēsous ho Nazōraios* is John's preferred form (18:5, 7; 19:19; cf. Luke 18:37), other NT references to Jesus as coming from or associated with Nazareth include *Iēsōus [Christos] toū Nazōraiou* (Matt 26:71; Acts 3:6; 4:10; 26:9); *Iēsous ho Nazārēnos* (Mark 10:47; 16:6; Luke 24:19); *Iēsous ho apo Nazareth* (Acts 10:38).
- c. See the textual note at 7:32 on the translation of "high priest" and "chief priests."

[18:1-3] After finishing his last meal with his disciples and speaking his last words to them, Jesus sets out with them for a garden across the Kidron Valley. The valley is mentioned only here in the New Testament but appears several times in the Old Testament and twice in Josephus (*cheimarros tou Kedrōn*, LXX: 2 Sam 15:23; 1 Kgs 2:37; 15:13; 2 Kgs 23:6, 12; *Ant.* 8.17; 9.151). Although the word translated "valley" (*cheimarros*) designates a stream that flows during the winter season of rain (i.e., a wadi), the reference here may be to the ravine itself. The Kidron Valley runs along the east side of Jerusalem, separating it from the Mount of Olives.³ Only John calls Jesus' destination a garden (18:1, 26); he does not name it "Gethsemane" (Matt 26:36 and Mark 14:32 call it a *chōrion*, "field"), nor does he explicitly locate it on the Mount of Olives (Luke 22:39-40).

According to John, Jesus frequently gathered there with his disciples, which explains how Judas knew the place and was able to lead "a band of soldiers" (*speira*, Matt 27:27; Mark 15:16) and the servants of the Jewish authorities there. The Greek word *speira* typically renders the Latin *cohors*, a tenth of a legion, or about six hundred Roman soldiers (but see Josephus, *J.W.* 3.67).⁴ Some commentators have doubted that Pilate would allow Jewish authorities to commandeer his troops for such a venture or, if he had allowed it, that he would have sent such an enormous number and then permitted the troops to take Jesus to the high priest.⁵ But Josephus refers to a *tagma* (brigade, detachment) of soldiers permanently located in the tower fortress known as the Antonia that overlooked the temple grounds, who were especially vigilant during festivals about potential uprisings of the people (*J.W.* 5.242-46). Given Jesus' popularity (11:48-50; 12:19), and since it was Passover, both Roman and Jewish authorities would be on high alert, eager to nip potential trouble in the bud. Even if the numbers of troops sent to confront Jesus are exaggerated, it is not unlikely

3. See BDAG; "Kidron, Brook of," *ABD* 4:37-38.

4. BDAG notes that *speira* may also translate *manipulus* (200 troops). In Jewish sources, *speira* also refers to the troops of a local military leader (such as Eleazar [2 Macc 8:23] or Judas [2 Macc 12:22]; cf. Jdt 14:11; 2 Macc 12:20). See comments and footnotes on 18:28.

5. Barrett 518; Keener 2:1080; Lincoln 2005, 443; Moloney 1998a, 130; Schnackenburg 3:222.

that Gentile and Jewish authorities together sought and secured Jesus' arrest and death.⁶ Still, John's account dramatically heightens the contrast between the large armed band of servants and soldiers carrying torches, lanterns, and weapons on the one hand, and Jesus and his misguided defenders on the other hand. Peter has a sword and manages to wield it in an effort to protect Jesus until he is stopped, not by Roman or Jewish force, but by Jesus himself. Whatever happens, happens only because Jesus permits or wills it.

Judas does not need to identify Jesus to the authorities—there is no kiss (as in Matt 26:48–59; Mark 14:44–45; Luke 22:47–48)—since Jesus will identify himself to them. The Gospels never explicitly say what Judas does that constitutes “betraying” or “handing over” Jesus (see comments on 12:6). While Judas may have betrayed Jesus' whereabouts to the authorities, there have been plenty of previous opportunities to arrest Jesus in public places (18:20); these failed because Jesus' hour had not yet come (7:30; 8:20, 59; 10:39). The Gospel does make it clear that Judas's defection from the ranks of Jesus' disciples and his handing over of Jesus are two sides of one coin: what Judas does, he does not as a disciple, but as one who has ceased to follow Jesus and has been lured away from faithful discipleship (6:66–71; 8:44–50).

[4–9] Aware of what is to come, Jesus charts his own destiny in keeping with God's commands (13:1–4). Earlier, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, Jesus stooped to wash the feet of his disciples, thus foreshadowing his upcoming death as an act of self-giving love and of purification. Here, with the knowledge of what is to come, Jesus prods the band of soldiers: “Whom are you looking for?” (18:4). Jesus does not shrink from what is coming: he steps forward to meet his captors, who will hand him over to death. As he had said earlier, “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down on my own” (10:18). Even if in the end the Romans do put Jesus on a cross, they do so only because Jesus allows and even wills it. The one who has and is life gives himself over to death.

Jesus identifies himself to those who have come to seek him. Twice he asks them, “Whom are you looking for?” (vv. 4, 7); twice they say, “Jesus of Nazareth”⁷ (vv. 5, 7); twice Jesus identifies himself to them (vv. 6, 8). The first time he responds simply, “I am he” (*egō eimi*); the second time he states, “I told you that I am he” (*eipon hymin hoti egō eimi*). While *egō eimi* is simply an ordinary means of self-identification,⁸ it is also the mode of God's

6. See Acts 4:27: “Both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus”; cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 18.64.

7. Or “Jesus the Nazarene.”

8. “It is I” or “I am he”; cf. 4:26; 6:20. Some translators and commentators translate simply, “I am,” perhaps intending a reference to Exod 3:14, where God identifies himself to Moses with the words “I AM WHO I AM.” But *egō eimi* in John more likely represents the LXX's translation of the Hebrew *ʾānī hāʾ*, “I am he.” See Excursus 5: “The ‘I Am’ Sayings of John.”

self-identification in the LXX, especially in those parts of Isaiah where God asserts his uniqueness (Isa 43:10, 13, 25; 44:6, 24; 45:5, 18). With these words resonant of divine self-revelation, Jesus acknowledges himself to the troops who have come for him, and when he does, they fall to the ground. "Fell to the ground" does not necessarily indicate bowing in worship or subservience; for such acts the typical biblical expression is "fell on their faces."⁹ Needless to say, it is unlikely that a contingent of Roman soldiers understood the significance of Jesus' self-identification as echoing the Septuagint translation of Isaiah. But the narrative does present these Romans unwittingly in the proper posture of honor and as powerless in the presence of Jesus.¹⁰

John depicts Jesus as confronting the formidable powers of Rome and of Israel: with neither lanterns, torches, nor weapons but only a word, he shows himself to be more powerful than all of them arrayed together against him. If Jesus is greater than Jacob (4:12) and Abraham (8:53), he is also greater than Caesar.¹¹ His word knocks a Roman cohort, along with the accompanying servants of the Jewish authorities, off their feet. Rome is confronting not merely a potential Jewish troublemaker, but the embodied Word of God: the one who speaks as God speaks, who has the unique powers to give life and to rule. In resisting Jesus, those who seize him are ultimately resisting God (cf. Acts 5:39). But Jesus does not destroy his captors; instead, he gives himself to them.

In order to set the course of events in motion, Jesus orders the soldiers to let his disciples go, demonstrating that he carries out the Father's will that he should lose none of those whom the Father has given to him (6:39; 10:28). Jesus' action of keeping and guarding those given to him by the Father—so that "none of them has perished, except the son of perdition" (17:12)—refers both to their physical lives in the present and the assurance of eternal life.¹² Like Scripture itself, Jesus' word "cannot be broken" and will be fulfilled (2:22; 10:35; 18:32). He did not "lose" any of them to death.

[10-14] While Jesus may have set events in motion, leading to his arrest and death, Simon Peter has other plans. Drawing a sword, he attacks the high priest's servant or slave (*doulos*), cutting off his right ear (cf. Matt 26:51; Mark 14:47; Luke 22:50). John's account names the man as Malchus. Malchus does not reappear in the Gospel, but named characters—except for well-known Jewish and Roman authorities, such as Caiaphas and Pilate—typically are or

9. Cf. Lev 9:24; Num 16:22; 20:6; Judg 13:20; 1 Kgs 18:39; Ezek 1:28; Dan 10:9; Matt 17:6; Rev 7:11; 11:16; 1 Macc 4:55.

10. Cf. the Roman centurion's acclamation of Jesus as "God's Son" (Matt 27:54; Mark 15:39) or as "righteous" or "just" (Luke 23:47).

11. To borrow the title from Thatcher's book, Jesus is *Greater than Caesar: Christology and Empire in the Fourth Gospel*.

12. Moloney (1998a, 130) argues that Jesus' claim not to have lost one of them includes Judas, and that Satan, not Judas, is the "son of perdition" of 17:12. But by this point in the narrative, Judas no longer belongs among Jesus' own (13:30).

become disciples of Jesus.¹³ The implication within the narrative may be that, although originally part of the entourage that arrested Jesus and wounded by one of Jesus' own disciples, Malchus is one of the sheep that the shepherd calls "by name" and leads out of the fold (10:3).¹⁴

Commanding Peter to put his sword away, Jesus contrasts his disciple's sword with his Father's cup (*to potērion*) that Jesus must drink. Both sword and cup represent death, but the sword brings about death to others; the cup entails Jesus' death, which brings life to others. According to Mark, Jesus first prayed that "the hour might pass from him" (14:35), then that the Father would "remove this cup" from him; yet he also prayed that God's will would be done (Matt 26:39, 42; Mark 15:36; Luke 22:42). In John Jesus refuses to pray, "Save me from this hour" (12:27), the hour that marks the climax of his mission, and instead asserts that he will "drink the cup that the Father has given" to him (17:11). As is typical of the Gospel, John tells the story from back to front, rolling the results of what happened into the purposes or causes of those events. Under the conviction that Jesus' death has accomplished God's purposes for the world's salvation, John makes it clear that what God wills—that Jesus drink this cup—Jesus also wills and does, thereby demonstrating the Son's unity with the Father (10:30). Throughout this scene Jesus speaks as one who not only intends to do the will of God but also as one who has done it. Jesus does not, therefore, pray that the cup will pass; instead, he asserts his intention to drink the cup the Father has given him.

Once Jesus' intention has been made clear, the armed men and "their captain" (*chiliarchos*)¹⁵ bind him and take him first (*prōton*) to Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas, "who was high priest that year." The office of high priest traditionally was hereditary, passed on at death; yet in the period of Seleucid and subsequent Roman rule, the high priest was subject to political appointment by the governing authorities. Deposing and replacing the high priest may have been a tool used to demonstrate Caesar's continued subjugation of the Jewish people; clearly it was also a way of exerting control over the Jewish authorities themselves.¹⁶ While the tenures of some high priests were short and tenuous at best, there was no annual replacement of the high priest, as some have alleged that John thought, given his reference to Caiaphas's being "high priest that year." Rather, Caiaphas is high priest in "that year," that is, in the year that Jesus died (11:49, 51). Assuming that Annas is conducting this preliminary

13. In Josephus, Malchus is the name of an Arabic ruler (*Ant.* 13.131; 14.370–75; 15.167), and Malichus is the name of a Jew (14.84, 273).

14. According to John, one of Jesus' disciples was known to the high priest (18:15–16), which could also explain knowledge of this name. Schnelle (1998, 264) speculates that the name belonged to someone in the Johannine circle who had previously been its opponent.

15. Lit., "leader of a thousand soldiers" (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.215); BDAG, a Roman tribune, the commander of a cohort or 600 men; so also LSJM, "tribune" or "commander."

16. VanderKam 2004, 423.

investigation (vv. 13, 16, 19, 22, and esp. v. 24),¹⁷ John actually refers to both Annas and his son-in-law, Caiaphas, as “high priest.” Luke also links the two, speaking of the “high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas” (3:2), suggesting that a former high priest could continue to be called “high priest” even if he was no longer in office.¹⁸ John may also have in view a broader circle of “chief priests” (*archiereis*) to which he refers elsewhere, and in which he included both the former and present “high priest” along with other important priests (7:32, 45; 11:47, 57; 12:10; 18:3, 35; 19:6, 15, 21).

Even so, if Caiaphas is the acting high priest, then why is Jesus sent first to Annas? According to Josephus, a high priest named Ananus (known by the abbreviated name, Annas; see also Luke 3:2) was appointed by Quirinius and removed from office by the Roman prefect Gratus; the years of his tenure would have been 6–15 C.E. (*Ant.* 18.26, 34–35; 20.198).¹⁹ Not only did Annas have a son-in-law, Joseph Caiaphas, who held the office of high priest from 18 to 36/37 C.E.; he also had five sons who held the office (*J.W.* 2.243). Even if not regarded by the Romans or the Jews as the high priest at the time of Jesus’ death, Annas’s influence clearly continued even after his deposition.²⁰ John’s account of having Jesus questioned first by Annas may well reflect, as the Gospel does elsewhere, the political situation of Jesus’ day (cf. 11:49–52).

Thus Jesus is taken to be interrogated by the chief religious and political authorities of the Jewish people. The “chief priests” first appear in the Gospel when they and Pharisees send servants (*hypēretas*) to arrest Jesus (7:32), but those servants had come back empty-handed (7:44–45). Now the chief priests, together with the Pharisees, have again sent servants (18:3) to apprehend Jesus; this time they do not come back empty-handed. While this may be attributed to the sheer numbers of armed troops sent to the garden with Judas, in John’s account it is clear that Jesus has permitted his own arrest, as his hour in “that year” has finally come.

18:15–27 Peter’s Denial and Jesus’ Interrogation before Annas

One of the most poignant scenes in any of the Gospels is the account of Peter’s denial of Jesus. In spite of Peter’s earlier, fervent protests that he will lay down his life for Jesus (13:37), Peter now evades the opportunity to identify himself as

17. So most commentators. Michaels (896–97, 906–9), thinking that the initial interrogator is Caiaphas, reads v. 24 retrospectively: “Now Annas had sent him bound.”

18. R. Brown 1970, 820; VanderKam 2004, 420. Josephus speaks of “Jonathan and Ananias, the high priests” (*J.W.* 2.243).

19. See VanderKam 2004, 420.

20. Bultmann considered Annas’s prestige and influence to be sufficient to ascribe to him a pivotal role in Jesus’ condemnation (1971, 643 n. 3); Hengel (1995c, 53) labels Annas the “*éminence grise*,” the power behind the scene.