

BLACK'S
NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SAINT JOHN

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ultimate source of their confidence is to be that this remains God's cause and God can be entrusted with it. Just as God has given Jesus what it took to accomplish his role, so now Jesus summons God to give what it will take for his followers to complete theirs. Despite the opposition they face, believers can be encouraged because they are in an intimate relationship with the Father and the Son, whose love and protection provide full support for the mission in the world for which they have been set apart.

2. The Passion

18.1—19.42

The long farewell section has prepared readers, along with the disciples, to understand the events that now follow. The discourse and prayer in the extended lull in the action underscore that what is about to happen is the culminating hour to which Jesus' mission has all the time been moving and that, despite all contrary appearances, the events of arrest, interrogation, trial and crucifixion are part of his hour of glory. He remains in sovereign control throughout these events, aware that they are essential to his Father's purposes in achieving life for the world. The various episodes within the passion tradition can now be related and the distinctive shaping and detail of the Fourth Gospel's narration of these develop and reinforce the implied author's perspective that has already been established. In particular, the overall structuring of this section should be noted. It progresses in five distinct episodes: (i) Jesus' arrest (18.1-11); (ii) his interrogation by Annas (18.12-27); (iii) his trial before Pilate (18.28-19.16a); (iv) his crucifixion and death (19.16b-37); and (v) his burial (19.38-42). The central and most extended scene is Jesus' Roman trial, and this corresponds to what has emerged as the central, overarching theme in this Gospel's narrative, that of judgement or cosmic trial. As will become apparent, the literary artistry and the ironies of that central episode contribute effectively to the narrative's dominant perspective, which claims that in Jesus' mission, trial and death it is not he who is being tried and judged but rather that in him God is trying and judging the world.

(i) *The arrest*

18.1-11

(1) When he had said these things, Jesus went out with his disciples across the Kidron Valley to where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. (2) Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. (3) So Judas, having got a detachment of soldiers and guards from the chief priests and the Pharisees, came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. (4) Jesus, knowing everything that was

going to happen to him, went out and said to them, 'Whom are you seeking?' (5) They answered him, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' He said to them, 'I am'.¹ Now Judas, who betrayed him, was also standing with them. (6) When he said to them, 'I am,' they drew back and fell to the ground. (7) So he asked them again, 'Whom are you seeking?' And they said, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' (8) Jesus answered, 'I told you that I am. So if you are seeking me, let these men go.' (9) This was to fulfil the word that he had spoken, 'I have not lost any of those you gave me.' (10) Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus. (11) Jesus said to Peter, 'Put your sword into its sheath. Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?'

Although for the sake of convenience this episode has been entitled 'The Arrest', the actual arrest of Jesus is not mentioned until v. 12, where it is simply stated as the necessary prelude to Jesus being taken to Annas. What the episode depicts is the encounter between Jesus and his opponents that leads to his capture. It falls into three parts – (i) a setting of the scene (vv. 1–3); (ii) the exchange between Jesus and the arresting party (vv. 4–9); and (iii) Peter's act of violence and Jesus' rebuke of him (vv. 10–11).

1–2 After the farewell discourse and its final prayer, **Jesus went out with his disciples across the Kidron Valley to where there was a garden.** The Kidron Valley lies to the east of Jerusalem between the city and the Mount of Olives, and the garden would have been at the foot of the Mount of Olives. The entering of the garden, mentioned here, and the exiting from it (v. 4) indicate it was a clearly defined enclosure. The Synoptic accounts of the arrest do not mention the Kidron but specify the place as Gethsemane (Mark 14.62; Matt. 26.36) and the location as the Mount of Olives (Mark 14.26; Matt. 26.30; Luke 22.39). The backdrop for their accounts may well be the incident in 2 Sam. 15.13–31, in which David leaves Jerusalem when he is betrayed by his counsellor, Ahithophel, and, weeping, ascends the Mount of Olives to pray to the Lord. There is the intriguing possibility that John also draws on the same tradition, since his designation of the Kidron Valley is, literally, 'the winter-flowing Kidron', the same phrase that occurs in 2 Sam. 15.23 LXX. The Kidron

¹ Some manuscripts supplement 'I am' (Εγώ εἰμι) with the name ὁ Ἰησοῦς, either after it (B) or before it (⋈ (without the definite article) A C K L W Δ Θ Π Ψ it^{aur,c,f,q} vg syr^{ph} cop^{sa,bo} goth arm). The proper name does not occur in p⁶⁰ D it^{be} syr^s. It is easy to see why the name might have been added in the light of the arresting party's response in the first part of the verse, and the rest of the episode appears to presuppose that Jesus' initial announcement here was simply 'I am' (cf. vv. 6, 8).

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was a brook or watercourse that was dry, except in the winter rainy season (cf. also Josephus, *B. J.* 5.70; *A. J.* 8.17).

Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. Judas' knowledge of the garden both emphasizes that the betrayer was one of Jesus' inner group of trusted followers and makes clear how he would know where to find Jesus (cf. Luke 22.39, which also supplies the information that it was Jesus' custom to go to pray at the Mount of Olives).

3 So Judas, having got a detachment of soldiers and guards from the chief priests and the Pharisees, came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. The Fourth Gospel alone has Judas guiding not only Jewish forces but also Roman soldiers to the garden. A 'detachment of soldiers' (σπεῖρα) is a term that is nearly always used elsewhere for a Roman cohort, which consisted of six hundred soldiers, though it is occasionally used as a translation for the Latin *manipulus* of two hundred troops. On the few occasions the term is employed of Jews, it is with reference to the troops of a local sovereign or a leader of a revolt (cf. 1 Macc. 3.55; 2 Macc. 8.23; Josephus, *B. J.* 2.20.7; *A. J.* 17.19.3; Mark 6.21) and never has in view the retinue at the disposal of the Sanhedrin or chief priests, from which it is in any case clearly distinguished here (cf. also v. 12). A number of factors make it historically implausible that Roman soldiers were present at the arrest. These include the size of the detachment (even at the minimal end of the scale), the likelihood that there was only one such Roman cohort in Jerusalem, at the Antonia Fortress (cf. Acts 21.31), and the unlikelihood of Judas having any influence with the Roman tribune or commandant, who is present with his cohort (cf. v. 12). It is also unlikely that the tribune would have made himself and his cohort available to the Jewish authorities at this point and then would agree to take Jesus to the house of Annas, who had been deposed by the Romans, yet fail to arrest the follower of Jesus who had resisted and caused injury. The presence of Roman troops here in the narrative supplies a link between the Jewish authorities and the Romans that is missing from the next section of the passion account because there is no trial before the Sanhedrin and no subsequent resolve to take Jesus to Pilate (see the discussion of the interrogation before Annas). At the same time, it heightens the drama of the arrest and is also in line with the evangelist's extensive treatment of the Roman trial and his concern to show that the hostile 'world' that condemned Jesus included both Roman and Jewish authorities. If there was an increasing trend in early Christian treatments of the death of Jesus to ameliorate the role of the Romans and to give the Jewish authorities the clear primary responsibility for Jesus' fate, then this Gospel does not fit altogether neatly into such a trajectory. It has the Romans included in the proceedings against Jesus from the outset of its passion account.

Typically, the narrator designates the Jewish authorities as 'the chief priests and the Pharisees', the phrase employed earlier for the authorities when they decide to take action against Jesus (cf. 7.32, 45; 11.47, 57). They had already sent out the temple guards or police at their disposal to arrest Jesus earlier in the narrative but had been unsuccessful (cf. 7.32, 45). The mention of the lanterns, torches and weapons reminds readers that the arrest is taking place at night, the night, with its symbolic overtones, into which Judas had gone out in 13.31. It is also ironic, since the lanterns and torches will not be needed to find the one who has claimed to be the light of the world and who will openly announce himself to the forces of darkness (cf. vv. 4–5; 8.12; 9.5), and the weapons will be superfluous in seizing the one whose kingdom is not of this world and therefore not dependent on the use of force (cf. vv. 10–11; 18.36).

4–5 As he has been portrayed in the course of his mission, so here and throughout the passion Jesus has sovereign knowledge and therefore is in control of events. He takes the initiative in confronting the array of forces that have come out to seize him: **Jesus, knowing everything that was going to happen to him, went out and said to them, 'Whom are you seeking?'** It is clear that Jesus is to be no helpless victim but acts in conformity with his earlier claim that no one will take his life from him but he will lay it down of his own accord (10.18). This is reinforced when, in response to the reply that they are seeking Jesus of Nazareth, **He said to them, 'I am.'** This is another Johannine double entendre employing the 'I Am' formula (cf. 4.26; 6.20; 8.28). On the surface it can be read simply as Jesus' self-identification – 'I am he, namely, Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are seeking' – but at the same time it is the divine self-declaration – 'I Am', with its background in Deut. 32.39 LXX and Isa. 40–55. The note that **Judas, who betrayed him, was also standing with them** serves as a prompt for recognizing this latter meaning. The disciples, and therefore readers, have already been prepared for it, because, in predicting Judas' betrayal, Jesus had said, 'I am speaking to you now before it occurs, so that, when it occurs, you may believe that I Am' (13.18–19). Now the reliability of Jesus' word is demonstrated, with both parts of this prediction being fulfilled in the narrative, as Judas' presence with the arresting party shows him as the betrayer and as Jesus utters the divine self-declaration. In this narrative, in contrast to the Synoptics (cf. Mark 14.43–6; Matt. 26.47–50; cf. also Luke 22.47–8), Judas does not take the lead in pointing out Jesus and there is no mention of a kiss, since Jesus has taken the initiative in identifying himself.

6 In order that there be no mistaking the significance of Jesus' self-identification, the narrator now relates that **When he said to them, 'I am,' they drew back and fell to the ground.** This is the typical

human reaction to a theophany (cf. Ezek. 1.28; Dan. 10.9). For a moment the true status of the characters in the narrative is graphically depicted. The ultimate powerlessness of the massed representatives of this world's powers – the Roman forces, the Jewish guards and the disciple turned betrayer – is revealed, as they have to retreat and prostrate themselves in the presence of the unique divine agent who is one with God.

7-9 After this brief disclosure in narrative form of the significance of the central character, he continues to take control of the situation. Jesus' question and their answer from vv. 4b-5a are repeated, and Jesus underlines his previous response and issues a command – **I told you that I am. So if you are seeking me, let these men go.** What is to follow is to be primarily a confrontation between Jesus himself and the Jewish and Roman authorities and in consequence Jesus orders that his followers be allowed to go. Both the hostile powers and Jesus' followers are seen to be under his authority. His followers do not simply flee in confusion, as in Mark 14.50 and Matt. 26.56; their departure is ordered by him. This, in turn, underlines the reliability of his earlier teaching about his control of his followers' destiny, enabling him **to fulfil the word that he had spoken, 'I have not lost any of those you gave me.'** The saying quoted does not repeat precisely any previous words of Jesus but clearly reflects his statement in the bread of life discourse about losing nothing of all that the Father has given him (6.39) and the assertion of his farewell prayer that he has guarded those he has been given so that not one of them has been lost except the one who was destined to be lost (17.12). The primary connection appears to be with this latter assertion, since Jesus has just identified himself by means of the divine self-designation, 'I Am', and in the same context Jesus had claimed, 'I kept them in the name which you have given me, and guarded them' (17.11). But there is an echo here also of the good shepherd's care for his sheep, of whom he had said that no one would snatch them from his hand (cf. 10.28). Though elsewhere in the narrative, and here particularly in relation to vv. 4-5, there has been keen interest in the fulfilment, and therefore trustworthiness, of Jesus' predictions, only here and in 18.32 is the fulfilment formula that is otherwise always used of the words of Scripture applied to the words of Jesus. This is a further indication that, as in the case of Scripture's words, Jesus' words can be considered God's words (cf. e.g. 7.16-17; 8.28, 38; 12.48-50).

10-11 The action of Peter that follows momentarily threatens to undermine this notion of Jesus' control over the disciples: **Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus.** In the Synoptics (cf. Mark 14.47 parr.) this incident involves an unnamed bystander or

disciple and an unnamed slave of the high priest. In Mark and Matthew, but not in Luke, the sword is wielded after Jesus' arrest. This Gospel, however, employs the incident as part of its characterization of Peter, reinforcing both the impetuosity of his earlier reactions (as in Luke, the attack with the sword comes before the arrest and appears unprovoked) and the disciples' misunderstanding of the nature of Jesus' mission (cf. 13.9, 36–8). It also supplies a name for the slave, whose severed ear, in line with Luke 22.50, is specified as the right ear, though, unlike Luke's account, here there is no healing of the ear. Instead Jesus immediately restores order with his command to Peter – **Put your sword into its sheath** (cf. Matt. 26.52). Jesus' cause is not furthered by violence. He has chosen a very different route in obedience to the will of his Father – **Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?** Again knowledge of the Synoptic tradition is reflected, this time of the Gethsemane episode, which the fourth evangelist has chosen to omit. There (cf. Mark 14.36 parr.) Jesus had prayed in great distress to the Father that 'this cup' be removed from him, while nevertheless being prepared to accept the Father's will. Here he is firmly resolved to drink the cup of suffering and death that awaits him, so that it can even be depicted as a gift from the Father.

The Synoptic accounts of Jesus' arrest are found in Mark 14.43–52, Matt. 26.47–56 and Luke 22.47–53, where they follow on from Jesus' praying in Gethsemane. John's account has taken care of the Gethsemane episode in its own way through the reference in 12.27–8 and through the extended, but remarkably different, prayer of 17.1–26 that precedes the arrest. Nevertheless, as has been noted, his narrative of the arrest also picks up on the language of the Gethsemane prayer with Jesus' talk of 'the cup' (v. 11). With the possible exception of the distinctive reference to the Kidron Valley, the differences in the Fourth Gospel's depiction of the arrest – Jesus' knowledge of what is about to happen, the presence of Roman troops, Jesus' initiative toward his captors, Judas' diminished role, Jesus' 'I Am' announcement and the response of the arresting party, Jesus' protective control over his disciples' fate, the addition of names to the incident with the sword, and the exchange with Peter – can all be seen, as indicated in the comments above, as the outworking of characteristic Johannine themes with the necessary literary elaboration. This suggests not so much independent access to and editing of a supposed pre-Markan passion narrative as the evangelist's creative reworking of the Synoptic traditions. Here, as elsewhere, it should be remembered, this does not entail the evangelist redacting actual copies of the Synoptics but rather knowing these other versions well enough to employ them in developing his own account. This Gospel has already indicated that Jesus' death is to be his hour of glory. In a world in which honour and shame were such pervasive values, the events of Jesus' passion would have

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been seen as entailing a shameful loss of honour. But in reworking the passion tradition, beginning here with the betrayal and arrest, the fourth evangelist tells the story in such a way as to show that in the apparent shame of these events the divine glory was in fact being displayed.

In the Synoptic accounts, not unnaturally, Judas is a major player in the arrest scene. In this Gospel his role in the arrest is not nearly as prominent. Until this point the focus has been on his act of betrayal of an intimate relationship with Jesus, for which the pervasive explanation offered is that he had come under the influence of the cosmic power of evil (cf. 6.70-1; 13.2, 27). After the arrest Judas will disappear from the narrative. There is no interest in his further fate, as is shown in some of the other narratives (cf. Matt. 27.3-10; Acts 1.16-20). In this final appearance his betrayal is put in perspective and shown not only to have been known by Jesus in advance but also to be under his control, as he, and not Judas, takes the initiative in the actual arrest, and Judas, now aligned with the powers of evil, falls back with them at the declaration of Jesus' divine sovereignty. This self-identification of Jesus as 'I Am' is at the heart of John's retelling of the arrest. Significantly, in the background to this formula of divine self-identification in Deut. 32.39 LXX and Deutero-Isaiah, the claim is made that Israel's God is the one who controls the events of history, can predict what will happen and will bring about Israel's future deliverance. Now here, even at his arrest, as Jesus takes the divine self-identification on his own lips, he is shown to be no mere victim of fate but the one who controls all that takes place, who has predicted this moment (cf. 13.19), and who secures the safety of his disciples, fulfilling another earlier saying connected with the divine name (cf. 17.11-12). His divine sovereignty is displayed both in the temporary recognition of his person and power by his enemies and in the willing acceptance of what he knows to lie before him as the result of the arrest. In this way the final uses in this Gospel of the divine self-predication by Jesus reinforce the point that all that is about to unfold in his suffering and death will be an expression of the unity between Jesus and God. The account strains credibility in terms of historicity but, in doing so, sets out brilliantly at the start of the passion the paradoxes that the one who embraces the consequences of arrest shares the divine identity and that the seemingly degrading events that are now under way constitute his glory.

18.12-27

(ii) *Jesus (and Peter) under interrogation*

(12) So the detachment of soldiers and the tribune and the Jewish guards arrested Jesus and bound him, (13) and brought him first to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. (14) Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was advantageous for one man to die for the people.