

Caiaphas

By Mark Mayberry

1/31/2010

Introduction

Although the New Testament identifies the high priest who tried Jesus by the single name “Caiaphas,” the first century Jewish historian Josephus refers to him as “Joseph who was called Caiaphas of the high priesthood.”ⁱ “Caiaphas is therefore a family name or possibly a nickname.”ⁱⁱ The name Caiaphas means “searcher” or “he that seeks with diligence.” This was his ordinary and official designation in Holy Scripture.

Caiaphas served as High Priest of the Jewish nation for 18 years, from roughly A.D. 18 to 36. He was appointed as high priest about A.D. 18 by the Roman procurator, Valerius Gratus.ⁱⁱⁱ He held office throughout the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate, but was deposed by Vitellius, governor of Syria. He was High Priest during the ministries of John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and the early apostles.

Caiaphas was the son-in-law of Annas, and apparently worked in close cooperation with him (John 18:12-13). Quirinius, governor of Syria, appointed Annas as high priest about A.D. 6 or 7. Although Annas was deposed by Valerius Gratus, the Procurator of Judea, in A.D. 15, he was still the most influential of the priests and continued to carry the title of high priest (Luke 3:1-2; Acts 4:5-6). After his removal, Annas was officially succeeded by each of his five sons, one grandson, and his son-in-law Caiaphas.

The expression in Luke 3:2, “in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,” has led some to maintain that these two men took turns serving as High Priest. However, this is not consistent with the historical record. It is more likely that Caiaphas actually exercised the functions of the office, while Annas still wore the honorary title because he formerly filled the position. Though out of office, Annas retained weighty influence.

Caiaphas was a Sadducee. This Jewish sect was named after their founder Sadoc who lived about 260 years before Christ. Their principle beliefs were (1) there is no angel, spirit or resurrection; the soul dies with the body (Matt. 22:23; Acts 23:8); (2) there is no fate or providence; mankind enjoys absolute freedom of action to do good or evil; (3) only the Pentateuch must be strictly followed.

Caiaphas appears three times in the gospel story: At the raising of Lazarus, at the trial of Jesus, and finally, at the trial of Peter and John. Caiaphas was an insolent, wicked man who did what was politically expedient without respecting what was right.

At The Raising Of Lazarus

After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the Jewish rulers became alarmed at his ever increasing popularity (John 11:45-53). Jesus threatened their power and position. They also feared retribution from imperial Rome if civil disorder was to break out. When the Sanhedrin was quickly called into session, Caiaphas pointed a way out of their dilemma. He counseled that they bide their time until the enthusiasm of the people had waned. By killing Jesus they could eliminate a dangerous rival, and placate the ire of Rome. As High Priest, Caiaphas' words carried great authority, and his counsel was accepted (Matt. 26:3-5).

Though quite unintended, Caiaphas used prophetic language when he said that it was expedient for one man to die for the people (John 11:49-52; 18:14). The death of Jesus would prove to be a blessing, but not in the manner that this opportunistic man intended. With cold-hearted calculation, Caiaphas sought to eliminate a political rival. With a heart full of compassion, God sought a blessing, not only for Israel but also for the whole world (Gen. 12:1-3). Just as Balaam was an unwilling prophet, Caiaphas was an unwitting prophet. If God could speak through a mute beast, He could communicate through a malevolent man (Num. 22:26-30).

At The Trial Of Jesus

After being betrayed into the hands of His enemies, Jesus was led first to Annas (John 18:12-13), and then brought bound unto Caiaphas (John 18:24).

After a preliminary inquisition before Annas, Jesus was tried before Caiaphas and the Jewish Counsel/Sanhedrin (Matt. 26:57-68; Mark 14:53-65; Luke 22:54, 63-71).

False witnesses were called, but their accusations were inconsistent and unconvincing. Jesus offered no reply to their charges. Finally, Caiaphas asked Jesus whether or not he was the Messiah. The affirmative answer was accompanied by a declaration of His divine power and majesty. Caiaphas, pretending to be aggrieved at what he judged a blasphemous claim to deity, appealed to his enraged allies, asking if this was not enough. They answered that Jesus deserved to die. However, because Caiaphas had no power to meet out capital punishment, Christ was taken to Pilate, the Roman governor, that His execution might be duly ordered.

This incident speaks volumes about the High Priest's deficiency of moral character. "The conduct of Caiaphas at this preliminary trial of Jesus, its time and its procedure, were almost entirely illegal from the standpoint of Jewish law."^{iv} "Caiaphas again displayed his lack of character by his open determination to find Jesus guilty. Since he was the high priest, his announcements were clothed with authority, but his shameless disregard of the forms of law to bring about the death of Jesus, revealed his warped conscience."^v

At The Trial Of Peter And John

The bigoted fury of Caiaphas was again exhibited at the trial of Peter and John (Acts 4:1-22). After healing the lame man who sat daily before the Beautiful gate of the temple, the apostles were brought before the Jewish tribunal. This manifestation of God's power was so evident that

the Jewish authorities could do nothing. After threatening Peter and John, they were forced to release them.

The apostles refused to be intimidated, but continued to boldly proclaim the truth (Acts 5:12-42). This provoked an additional response by Caiaphas and his cronies. They cast Peter and John into prison. However, being delivered from prison by an angel, the apostles continued to preach the gospel. These events greatly confounded and confused the Jewish leaders. Peter and John were brought before the council where they were threatened, beaten, and then released. However, they were not discouraged by this mistreatment. Departing from the Sanhedrin, they rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for the name of Christ.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is interesting to contrast the high priesthood of Christ and Caiaphas. Christ was spiritually-minded, Caiaphas was materialistic. Christ was humble, Caiaphas was arrogant. Christ supported the truth, Caiaphas opposed the same.

Please note how the book of Hebrews describes the High Priesthood of Jesus. In striking contrast with Caiaphas, Christ is merciful and faithful (Heb. 2:17-18). He was faithful to God in all things (Heb. 3:1-2). Christ is sympathetic toward the weakness of His followers (Heb. 4:14-16). Christ is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners (Heb. 7:26-27). He ministers at the true tabernacle (Heb. 8:1-2). Having offered himself as a sacrifice for sin, He has obtained a more excellent ministry (Heb. 8:3-5). He serves at a greater and more perfect tabernacle (Heb. 9:11-15).

ⁱ Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, trans. William Whiston, (1867; reprint ed, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1960), Book 18, Chapter 4, Paragraph 3.

ⁱⁱ Ronny Reich, "Caiaphas Name Inscribed on Bone Boxes," *Biblical Archaeology Review*, September/October, 1992, p. 40.

ⁱⁱⁱ Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, trans. William Whiston, (1867; reprint ed, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1960), Book 18, Chapter 2, Paragraph 2.

^{iv} *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed. (1982), s.v. "Caiaphas," by C. M. Kerr.

^v Herbert Lockyer, *All the Men of the Bible*, p. 81.