

3. CAIAPHAS OSSUARY*

The gospel accounts (Matt 26:3, 57; Luke 3:2; John 11:49; 18:13–14, 24, 28; Acts 4:6) indicate that Caiaphas (Καϊάφας) was the high priest in Jerusalem the year that Jesus died, serving between A.D.18-36 (though his father-in-law Annas¹ retained the title).² The Gospel accounts refer to him only as Caiaphas, but his full title was Joseph, son of Caiaphas (יֹסֵף בֶּרֶךְ יוֹסֵף, *Yosef Bar Kayafa*). He was son-in-law of Annas in the apostolic records, and was high priest by the appointment of Rome.³ In A.D. 36, the Syrian governor Vitellius removed the prefect Pilate, as well as the high priest Caiaphas.⁴

The Gospel writers view Caiaphas as the primary priestly opponent of Jesus, and he is especially known for willingness to sacrifice Jesus for tranquility in Israel,⁵ “‘If we let Him *go on* like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.’ But one of

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¹ “This Ananias was not the son of Nebedeus, as I take it, but he who was called Annas or Annanus the Elder, the 9th in the catalogue, and who had been esteemed high priest for a long time; and besides, Caiaphas his son-in-law had five of his own sons high priests after him, who were those of numbers 11, 14, 15, 17, 24, in the foregoing catalogue. Nor ought we to pass slightly over what Josephus here says of this Annas or Ananias, that he was high priest a long time before his children were so, he was the son of Seth, and is set down first for high priest in the foregoing catalogue, under number 9. He was made by Quirinus, and continued till Ismael, the 10th in number, for about twenty-three years; which long duration of his high priesthood, joined to the successions of his son-in-law, and five children of his own, made him a sort of perpetual high priest, and was perhaps the occasion that former high priests kept their titles ever afterwards; for I believe it is hardly met with before him.” *Antiquities* 20.206

² “Third, Josephus often confuses the reader by speaking of various individuals as “high priest” at the same time, or by calling someone high priest when he was no longer in office (e.g., *War* 2.441; *Ant.* 20.205; *Life* 193). Yet the Bible and Josephus both insist that only one person can serve as high priest at one time. On closer examination, we realize that Josephus allows former high priests to retain the title and prestige of the office as long as they live. Perhaps this usage reflects his assumption that high priests *ought* to serve for life. In any case, we have a similar confusion in the Gospels and Acts. Luke 3:2 and Acts 4:6 mention several high priests (especially Annas and Caiaphas) as though they were current. More baffling yet, John 18:12–26 has Jesus interrogated by Annas (=Ananus I), who is first called “the father-in-law of the high priest” (18:13) but is then addressed as “high priest” (18:15, 19, 22). And when Jesus’ interview with the high priest is finished, he is sent in chains to “Caiaphas the high priest” (18:24). If the authors of Luke and John made the same assumptions as Josephus, and expected their readers to do so, then their accounts become somewhat less puzzling. Ananus I was an extremely distinguished high priest in Josephus’ view, for five of his sons followed him in office (*Ant.* 20.197–198). So it makes sense that the Gospel authors would remember his name in conjunction with Caiaphas, the serving high priest at the time of Jesus’ trial.” Steve Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992).

³ “He [Nero] was now the third emperor; and he sent Valerius Gratus to be procurator of Judea, and to succeed Annius Rufus. (34) This man deprived Ananus of the high priesthood, and appointed Ismael, the son of Phabi, to be high priest. He also deprived him in a little time, and ordained Eleazar, the son of Ananus, who had been high priest before, to be high priest: which office, when he had held for a year, Gratus deprived him of it, and gave the high priesthood to Simon, the son of Camithus; (35) and when he had possessed that dignity no longer than a year, Joseph Caiaphas was made his successor.” *Antiquities* 18.31

⁴ “Vitellius . . . deprived Joseph, who was called Caiaphas, of the high priesthood, and appointed Jonathan, the son of Ananus, the former high priest, to succeed him.” Josephus, *Ant.*, XVIII, iv, 3

⁵ “Second, Josephus describes a coincidence of interest between Jewish chief-priestly circles and the Roman government. He presents the chief priests by and large as favoring cooperation with Rome, even in the face of severe provocation. Not only do these eminent citizens support the governors’ harsh treatment of political terrorists and religious fanatics, they also cooperate in removing such troublesome individuals. A particularly interesting case concerns one Jesus son of Ananias, a common peasant who predicted the fall of the temple four years before the outbreak of the revolt. For more than seven years, especially at festivals, he would cry, “Woe to Jerusalem!” and “A voice against Jerusalem and the sanctuary, a voice against the bridegroom and the bride, a voice against all the people.” The exasperated temple leaders punished him without success, and eventually passed him over to the Roman governor. As he would not answer any questions, he was flayed to the bone and released on grounds of insanity (*War* 6.300–309). This cooperation of the leading citizens with the Romans, when it came to a person who had disrupted the already tense festival periods in Jerusalem, fits with the general picture of political relations painted by Josephus. This picture in turn helps one to imagine some cooperation between the Jewish leadership and the Roman governor in the trial of Jesus.” Steve Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992).

them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all, nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish.’” (John 11:48–50 NAS95)

Not only do the canonical Gospels and the *Antiquities* of Josephus provide evidence regarding the existence and position of Joseph, son of Caiaphas, contemporary archaeology supports his existence. In November of 1990, while a work crew were building a road south of Abu Tor, in what is called the Peace Forest, but on a hill traditionally called the Mount of Evil Counsel, the family tomb of Caiaphas was uncovered. In the tomb archaeologists found an ornate ossuary with the inscription Joseph, son of Caiaphas in Aramaic. A few scholars question whether the inscription truly refers to Caiaphas the high priest who condemned Jesus, especially since it does not mention his title, yet the ornateness of the ossuary would lead one to believe that the bones of the person placed inside indicates someone of considerable rank and wealth. One cannot argue for certain that the ossuary is that of the Caiaphas mentioned in the Gospels, but we know of no other Joseph, son of Caiaphas in the first century who would be so identified and buried in an ossuary such as this.⁶

⁶ Helen K. Bond, *Caiaphas: Friend of Rome and Judge of Jesus?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), x + 220 pp (who says that most of the objections have been met, and that it is most likely the tomb of Caiaphas); See also Z. Greenhut, “Burial Cave of the Caiaphas Family,” *BAR* 18/5 (1992), pp. 28–36, 76 and Ronny Reich, , ‘Caiaphas Name Inscribed on Bone Boxes’, *BAR* 18/5 (1992), pp. 38–44, 76. But see the caution of W. Horbury, ‘The “Caiaphas” Ossuaries and Joseph Caiaphas’, *PEQ* 126 (1994), pp. 32–48. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 438-39.