

Doing Justice to the High Priest Caiaphas

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Caiaphas plays an important role in the Christian passion story as the high priest who hands Jesus over to the Roman governor Pilate for crucifixion. Adele Reinhartz analyzes how his character has been portrayed through the centuries, mostly as the abhorrent distorted image of a Jew. I ask whether Ton Veerkamp's interpretation of the Gospel of John does him justice.

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1 A Fascinating Book about Caiaphas the High Priest

Dear Mrs. Reinhartz, actually, I only wanted to have a quick look at your book¹ about *Caiaphas the High Priest*, which came to my attention through another of your books,² *Cast out of the Covenant*. But then I was so intrigued by this excellent study that I read it cover to cover after all. How little is known historically of Caiaphas, how scarcely he is mentioned in the Gospels, and in what extravagant colors his personality has been painted over the course of 2,000 years, from the Church Fathers onward, in medieval and modern mystery and passion plays, as well as in literature and film, so that many people have quite clear images of him in their minds—deeply negative images, in fact, that are usually tinged with anti-Semitism and were long intended to reinforce anti-Semitic attitudes.

Since at present, I am mainly interested in the question of whether the Gospel of John was already written with an anti-Jewish aim or whether it is rather to be under-

1 Adele Reinhartz, *Caiaphas the High Priest*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2011. All page numbers in the following text in round brackets (...) without further reference refer to the following quotations from your book. Quoted notes from your book are introduced with the page number and number of the quote. Square bracketed numbers in the running text [...] refer to page numbers of cited works by other authors.

2 Adele Reinhartz, *Cast Out of the Covenant: Jews and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John* (Lanham: Lexington Books-Fortress Academic, 2018). See my commentary: [Jesus the Messiah: Liberation for all Israel](#).

stood as a document of an inner-Jewish dispute at the end of the 1st century,³ I will deal in this review only with those aspects that have to do with this question. This concerns especially the chapters in which you deal with the interests that lead historians and exegetes to hold certain views about the historical context of Caiaphas, his interests, and his intentions and actions. You mention some viewpoints in this book that you have not addressed in your other books on this question.⁴

2 Interest-led Imagination in Portraying Caiaphas by Josephus and in the Gospels

First, you premise that history is something that does not just exist. What has passed can be inferred only indirectly through sources, and for every source that transmits something of the past to us, it is true that it has been written from certain presuppositions and interests.⁵

This means that in every picture of the past, even in that which wants to be somewhat objective as historiography by examining evidence and placing it in a context, imagination also flows in. Concerning the ancient sources about Caiaphas you write in this context (6):

Even for Josephus and the New Testament, which are used as primary sources by later writers and artists, Caiaphas is an idea, a personage from the past who no longer exists but must be imagined. As such he can be molded and shaped to fit the stories into which they would place him: for Josephus the story of Jewish-Roman relations in the first century, and for the Evangelists

3 See Ton Veerkamp, *Solidarity Against the World Order. A Political Reading of the Gospel of John about Jesus Messiah of all Israel*, Gießen (Germany) 2021. Quotations from this work are cited with the abbreviation **Veerkamp 2021** and the page number of its [PDF version](#). In addition, they are substantiated by a link to the respective section in the [online version](#) (with the indication of the relevant paragraph(s), counting the entire Bible text preceding the section as the 1st paragraph).

Furthermore, there are quotes from the article [Ton Veerkamp: „The World Different“](#), in which I summarize another book by this author: **Veerkamp 2013** = Ton Veerkamp, *Die Welt anders. Politische Geschichte der Großen Erzählung* © Institut für Kritische Theologie Berlin e. V. according to the edition published in Berlin © Argument Verlag 2013.

4 See—in addition to the book mentioned in note 2—Adele Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple. A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John*, New York/London 2001, and Adele Reinhartz, *The Word in the World. The Cosmological Tale in the Fourth Gospel*, Atlanta/Georgia 1992, and my book reviews [The Beloved Disciple Befriending Adele Reinhartz](#) and [Otherworldly Word or Overcoming the World Order?](#)

5 For this purpose, you refer to the book by R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1946. Erhard S. Gerstenberger drew my attention to the following book on the same subject: Achim Landwehr, *Die anwesende Abwesenheit der Vergangenheit. Essay zur Geschichtstheorie*, Frankfurt am Main 2016.

the story of Jesus, the Christ, the son of God and agent of salvation for all humanity.

To this, I add from the point of view of Ton Veerkamp: If we understand the evangelist John as a representative of a Jewish-Messianic group that proclaims the Messiah Jesus as the liberator of Israel in the midst of the peoples, then, in this context, Caiaphas acquires yet another significance.

2.1 Criticism of the Priesthood Already Existed in the Jewish Bible

In connection with your account of the appointment of the high priest by Roman governors in the 1st century, you also address the fact that (18) in “theory the high priesthood was a hereditary position” but “there is evidence to suggest that in the period of the monarchy the high priest may have been a royal appointee.” Thus, you also hint at the problem, without directly addressing it, that the priesthood, according to the Torah and the prophets, was supposed to be at the service of the liberating will of the God of Israel, but in fact had to subordinate itself to the kings of Israel (or later Judah), who mostly acted in opposition to God.

You outline the beginning of the Second Temple period as follows:⁶

In 586 B.C.E. the Babylonians, under Nebuchadrezzar, conquered the kingdom of Judah and destroyed Solomon’s Temple. But with the return of the exiles some seventy years later, the building of a second Temple began in Jerusalem, and the sacrifices and related institutions were resumed. In the absence of a monarchy, the Temple became the nation’s most important institution, and the high priest took on the political role, and attendant honor, that had previously belonged to the king.

As to the *de facto* position of the high priest, you are right, but you do not mention that the state structure created by Ezra and Nehemiah is not to be a kingdom of the kind of all nations. Ton Veerkamp⁷ views in Nehemiah 8:2-8 evidence that here—by

6 On the reconstruction of the temple, you add (209, note 33):
 “Ezra 6 implies that sacrifices were resumed when the Persian conquerors of the Babylonian Empire permitted the exiles to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the Temple. The transition from the First Temple to the Second Temple period so briefly summarized here is the subject of numerous scholarly studies. For discussion of the Persian period, see Charles E. Carter, *The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian Period: A Social and Demographic Study*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 294. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999; Yehezkel Kaufmann, *History of the Religion of Israel, Volume IV: From the Babylonian Captivity to the End of Prophecy*. New York: Ktav, 1977.”
 On the temple as the most important institution of the nation after the exile, you refer (209, note 34) to Martha Himmelfarb, *A Kingdom of Priests: Ancestry and Merit in Ancient Judaism*. Jewish Culture and Contexts. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006, 6.

7 See [Ezra and Nehemiah: Establishing of the Torah Republic](#), par. 7.

an inclusive male-female vote—a republic is established under the constitution of the Torah (probably being understood to be a prior form of Deuteronomy).

Furthermore, according to Veerkamp, the books of the Torah that were emerging at this time, especially Exodus and Numbers, contain a coded history of this Torah republic under Persian supremacy that reflects numerous conflicts between the Aaronite (or Zadokite) priesthood and the Levites who called upon Moses.⁸ In the narrative of the Golden Calf, the Levites maintain the upper hand against the priesthood, which allows the idolatry of the people. In the narrative of Korah's rebellion, revolting Levites are literally swallowed up by the earth. I mention this to show that the Torah already contains passages that are decidedly critical of the priesthood.

2.2 Caiaphas and Annas as the Most Important High Priests in the 1st Century

What the historian Josephus has to say about Caiaphas, you summarize succinctly as follows: (22)

As high priest from 18 until 36 or 37, Caiaphas had a longer tenure by far than any other high priest in the Second Temple period. Ananias son of Nedebaeus comes a distant second, at eleven years (48-59 C.E.); most others were high priests for only a year or two. Caiaphas's long tenure is particularly noteworthy as it spanned the terms of two governors, Gratus and Pilate; a change in high priest normally accompanied a change in Roman governor, except in this one case. Second, and equally important, are Caiaphas's family connections. As a Roman appointee he clearly did not inherit the high-priestly mantle from his father, but it is worth noting that as the son-in-law of Annas, high priest in the period 6-15 C.E., Caiaphas belonged to a distinguished family that included five other high priests of his generation: his five brothers-in-law, the sons of Ananus (Eleazar, 16-17 C.E.; Jonathan, 36 or 37 C.E.; Theophilus, 36-41 C.E.; Matthias, 42-43 C.E.; Annas II, 62 C.E.). Being a member of a prominent high-priestly family likely did not hurt his position. It is also interesting to note that the vestments were under Roman jurisdiction during his tenure; this point emphasizes the power differential between Caiaphas and the Roman governor.

Since Caiaphas and Annas were the two prominent names of high priests in the 1st century, it is not surprising that precisely these two also appear in the testimonies of the New Testament, albeit in a partly contradictory way. However, the way the two are incorporated into the narrative in John's Gospel, for example, certainly has little to do with the historical reality at the time of Jesus (50), since there are plenty of "contradictions and ambiguities" in the Gospels' portrayal of their role:

8 See [The Five Books of Moses](#).

The differences among the works of the Evangelists with regard to the high priest Caiaphas's role in Jesus' death, while frustrating to historians, provide excellent opportunities for those who create imaginary narratives to fill in the gaps and piece events together, linked with newly created ones, in a way that makes for a dramatic and satisfying story.

It may well be that the Gospels themselves are already evidence of that type of imaginative construction at work. Indeed it would seem that the process of adding flesh to the dry bones of Caiaphas began with the Evangelists who sought to create a coherent narrative on the basis of their own literary and oral sources.

This is precisely Ton Veerkamp's view, according to which John draws the two prominent high priestly figures Annas and Caiaphas into the inner-Jewish conflict between Jesus-Messianic Jews and priestly or Pharisaic-Rabbinic Jews in a very specific way.

2.3 The High Priest Annas as Examining Magistrate in the Trial against Jesus

In this process, he assigns the role of an examining magistrate to Annas and thereby, as Veerkamp assumes, pursues quite specific goals:⁹

Here, Annas acts as an investigating judge who must decide whether further proceedings were necessary. Judges like Annas usually ask about things they have long known. The questioning serves the appearance of legality of the proceedings.

Annas asks Jesus about his disciples—accomplices in his eyes—and about his teaching, that is, about his political intentions. Jesus lets the judge come to nothing. First of all, Annas knows all about it long ago; secondly, he would have to question those who have listened to Jesus during his public speeches. They could give more objective information than he himself.

This calm and composed response of Jesus unmasks the whole arrangement and casts Annas in a ridiculous light. This catches the eye of one of Annas' eager officials. He slaps Jesus in the face and justifies his action by pointing to Jesus' insubordination. Jesus' reaction is meant to arouse our indignation. In fact, Jesus' attitude challenges violence. The narrative of the trial of Jesus is a timeless one; this is what happened to all who engaged in political resistance to an autocratic regime and were arrested as a result. Jesus is a political prisoner among the many others before him and after him who had no chance of being treated fairly.

9 Veerkamp 2021, 349 ([Simon's Discipleship. Jesus before the Great Priest](#), par. 4-6).

2.4 Caiaphas as a Wise Representative of the Interests of the Leadership of Judea and as a Prophet

Not in the trial of Jesus himself, but in the planning of his elimination, Caiaphas assumes a more important role in John's Gospel. According to Ton Veerkamp, John (11:47-53) portrays this high priest as a prudent defender of the interests of the Judean leadership classes at the time of Jesus, wherein he explicitly includes (11:47, 57) the Pharisaic opposition of the time, who was concerned about the crowds joining the Jesus movement:¹⁰

The situation is precarious. The problem is Jesus, or rather the many signs he does. "If we allow him to do so," they say, "... then the Romans will come." It is the only time that the word "Romans" appears in the Gospels. The Sanhedrin fears that the appearance of Jesus might bring the end of the place and the nation.

The political leadership and the Perushim as the official opposition do not want any changes to the status quo. They do not see that society has already fallen apart. The sign of the unstoppable disintegration of society is the death of Lazarus. There is no example in history that any political leadership can decide of its own accord that its system is finished and that something radically new must begin. The new would mean the end of the system.

However, they do not see the global system, the *kosmos*, but only their own local system, which functions within the global system. Their problem is the abolition of their system, Rome is not the problem for them. *Arousin*, "they take away, abolish," is the word. "To abolish the place" can mean to take the place away from the hands of the population and their leadership. This is consistent with "abolish the nation." "The place (*ha-maqom*)" is not only the city but the sanctuary as its political heart.

Now we must draw attention to the difference between "nation," *ethnos*, and "people," *laos*. *Ethnos* is *goy* in Hebrew, and *laos* is *ʿam*. Deuteronomy 4:6 both words meet in one sentence, "What a wise and reasonable people (*ʿam-chakham we-navon*), this great nation (*ha-goy ha-gadol ha-ze*)." An *ethnos/goy* is a people as it acts outward, to the outside world. A *laos/ʿam* is a people as it is held together inwardly. The Romans are dealing with an *ethnos/goy*; if they recognize the people as *ethnos/goy*, they grant them a certain degree of self-government. To "abolish the nation" is to deprive a people of the right of self-government. This is precisely what the political leadership fears.

Consequently, the *kohen gadol* (*archiereus*), the high priest, is in demand. He acts as the predominant chairman of the board of directors, who must put the helpless management ("You know nothing") back on track. He does not ap-

10 Veerkamp 2021, 256-57 ([Dying for the Nation](#), par. 4-14).

peal to morals, but to interests, “You do not consider that it is in your interest (*sympherei hymin*). To save the sanctuary and thus the people as *laos/‘am*—and that means, in the eyes of the leadership, preventing the downfall of *ethnos/goy*—a human must die. Political interest ranks before morality; Caiaphas says, as Brecht later said, “First foods, then morals.” They are not interested in the people, but in their model of self-government, in the status of the *ethnos loudaiōn*. Their political interest is the maintenance of local self-government. For it is on this that their idea of the “place,” *maqom*, is reduced. They are not concerned with “the place (*ha-maqom*) that the Eternal One chooses to make his Name live there (Deuteronomy 16:2, etc.).

This cunning confusion of terms, this contamination of *laos* with *ethnos*, is part of the constant repertoire of all politics. *Hyper tou laou*, “for the sake of the people,” is the propagandistic element here. The hesitant leadership collective has to understand that Jesus must be killed both in their interest (the real reason) and for the sake of the people (propaganda).

Here the political writer Johannes intervenes. Caiaphas does not say all this out of himself, out of jest and whim, writes John, but as the great priest of the year he must act as a prophet, that is, he must point to what is politically mandatory. Within the Sanhedrin, he gives a governmental declaration (which here means *prophēteuein*) that Jesus should die for the sake of the nation, and so for the sake of the people. But, says John, here, in the Sanhedrin, it is not about the people (*laos*), but about self-government (*ethnos*). Jesus will die, but not only for the sake of self-government (*ethnos*), as Caiaphas said, but “also to bring together into one all the children of God who have been scattered.”

To bring together all Israel, all the children of God, wherever they live under the ruling world order, in one synagogue (*synagagein*): this is the goal of Johannine politics. When all the *God-born* have been brought together, then there will be the place where the God of Israel will allow his name to live. For the *God-born* are not the children of Adam, or even the children of God—humans in general—but rather certain humans, the children of Israel. And a child of Israel is the human who accepts “the light,” “who is not begotten of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man (Abraham), but divinely,” 1:13.

Diaskorpizein, “to scatter,” always refers to the fate of Israel after the destruction of the first sanctuary. This centrifugal movement, which determined the life of Israel in the Diaspora since the first destruction of the place, is reversed into a centripetal movement, towards the one place. This is not an invention of John, but a good prophetic tradition.

The message in John is not that “Jesus died for all humans” and that Israel according to the flesh has had its day, but that the humans, as far as they “accept the light,” find their destiny in the newly created people (*‘am nivra’*) of

Psalm 102:19. In John, this is something else than the heathen mission and the Christian church.

To the leadership, the whole story has only the consequence of planning the elimination of the Messiah; the decision is hereby taken. Like a good CEO, Caiaphas has asserted himself in management.

2.5 Reasons for the Wrath of God Leading to the Ruin of the *topos* and the *ethnos*

Now to your consideration of the same passage. I find it interesting that you relate verse 11:48, in which the Judean leadership fears an abolition of the *topos*, that is, the “place” in the sense of the temple or city of Jerusalem, and the *ethnos*, that is, the “nation” in the sense of the autonomy of Judea (40), to 2 Maccabees 5:19-20,

19 But the Lord did not choose the nation for the sake of the holy place, but the place for the sake of the nation. 20 Therefore the place itself shared in the misfortunes that befell the nation and afterward participated in its benefits; and what was forsaken in the wrath of the Almighty was restored again in all its glory when the great Lord became reconciled.

You wonder (41) what, in the eyes of the Judean leadership, might have provoked the wrath of God that would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem or its temple and nation. Was it the concern “that Jews who believe in Jesus necessarily sever their covenantal relationship with God” (12:10-11), was thus the “belief in Jesus ... seen as desertion of Judaism”? A judgment of Romans might then come as in “passages such as 2 Kings 21:12-15, in which God responds to Judaea's idolatry under King Manasseh.”

The Evangelist, who wrote his Gospel perhaps two decades after 70 C.E., may well have had in mind Rome's destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. If so, however, it is an ironic reading, for from his perspective it was not the people's belief in Jesus that constituted desertion of God's covenant but the Jewish authorities' adamant resistance to such belief (cf. 9:41).

Whether we should call this irony, I leave undecided. It is certainly true that, according to John, the Judean leadership and the Jesus Messianists accused each other of having deviated from the ways of the God of Israel. And it may well be that John put into the mouths of the Judean leadership at the time of Jesus the fear that Jesus' followers would provoke a revolt, as actually came to pass in the Judean War, leading to the suspension of their privileges and the destruction of the temple. In this direction, in your eyes, goes a “second line of interpretation,” which is political (41-42):

the widespread belief of Jews in Jesus might make Rome fear rebellion and therefore prompt the empire to move against Judaea and the Temple. That the Romans behaved in just such a manner is implied in Acts 21:38, in which a Roman tribune asks Paul whether he is “the Egyptian who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness.” Jose-

phus describes several situations in which Rome used military force against a group of Jewish followers of one would-be messiah or another (*Ant.* 20:97-99, 20:169-72, 20:188; *War* 2.258-63). Given the multilayered nature of John's narrative and symbolism, both of these interpretations may be at play simultaneously.

2.6 Possible Motives for Caiaphas to Hand Jesus Over to the Romans

In your eyes, several noteworthy things stand out in Caiaphas' remarks (42):

First, he "does not explicitly address the concern for both temple and nation, emphasizing only the potential benefit that Jesus' death would have for the nation." Later you conclude that Caiaphas did not want to hand Jesus over to the Romans on the occasion of the cleansing of the temple.

Further, you assume as the background of his words, which in the eyes of the narrator are "a prophecy not only of Jesus' imminent death but also of its salvific and eschatological importance for all who believe," alluding "to the Day of Atonement and the practice of sending a goat out into the wilderness as a 'scapegoat' that carries on its head the sins of the entire nation and, in dying, expiates those sins on the nation's behalf." Indeed, in a sense, Caiaphas can be seen here as "the spokesman for the idea that Jesus died a sacrificial death for the sake of the people (John 1:29)." However, it does not fit with this insight that you assume that Jesus supposedly dies the redeeming death not at all for the Jewish people but only for the Gentiles who believe in him, while the Jews, according to the title of your last book on this subject, are *Cast out of the Covenant*.

After all, you are aware that the Gospels judge the high priest Caiaphas far less negatively than later enemies of the Jews who refer to the New Testament:

In the synoptic Gospels, it is Jesus who prophecies his death; in John it is Caiaphas. A second theme, shared with Matthew, is the fear that Jesus' actions and his popularity threaten to disrupt the relationship between Judaea and Rome. Third is Caiaphas's lack of personal animosity toward Jesus. Although the high priest advocates and provides a rationale for Jesus' death, he is motivated not by fear or hatred of Jesus but national preservation, that is, the concern that his behavior might have dire consequences for the people as a whole.

However, you also consider (43) a "more cynical view of the high priest." Could it be that, as Helen Bond¹¹ thinks, he ultimately has nothing in mind but "the maintenance of the status quo, his own supremacy, and that of his advisers," i.e., selfish in-

11 Helen K. Bond, *Caiaphas: Friend of Rome and Judge of Jesus?* Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2004, 132.

terests? The word *sympherei*, which refers to the benefit or the interest of the ruling class to preserve their privileges connected with the preservation of the autonomous status, and the additional argumentation with the concept of the people, *laos*, which reinterprets Jesus' death propagandistically as *dying for the people*, suggest that John assesses Caiaphas in this way.

In this respect, John may well regard Caiaphas as the actual traitor who—as the representative of the Judean ruling class—delivers Jesus to the Romans, while Judas acts merely as a henchman who does the dirty business of denunciation. Interestingly, (75) Oscar Wilde's "Ballad of Reading Gaol" ends with the "kiss of Caiaphas," to which you note:

Wilde here substitutes Caiaphas for Judas in the role of Jesus' betrayer. This creates the alliterative effect of the final line quoted above, but perhaps also draws upon a well-established practice of using Caiaphas to represent any and all opponents to what is good and right.

A view of Caiaphas as the one who hands Jesus over to Rome need not, however, involve personal animosity, which Bond [133] outlines thus (43):

"Caiaphas comes across as a hostile character, intent on self-preservation and callous in his disregard for human life. As high priest, he epitomizes Jewish opposition to Jesus and, like 'the Jews' generally in this Gospel, allies himself with the satanic forces of darkness and sin. Yet it is also apparent that John has some residual regard for the office of high priest; in that role, even a hostile character can unconsciously speak the words of God."

In this context, you cast doubt on such an assessment:

One might suspect, however, that Bond is here reading into John the later interpretations of Caiaphas as unredeemably wicked.

Elsewhere¹² I challenged your entire interpretation of John's Gospel as an anti-Jewish, even anti-Semitic, scripture on precisely this point. For you, however, it is important to distinguish Caiaphas from those who confront Jesus "as directly hostile to Jesus" in John's Gospel.

2.7 Who are the Ones who Call for Jesus' Crucifixion at Pilate's Praetorium?

I also agree with you (46) in stating against Bond that those who bring "Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters" after 18:28 were certainly not "Caiaphas and Annas."¹³ However, Ton Veerkamp places great emphasis on pointing out who is *not*

12 See notes 2 and 4.

13 (212, n. 51) Bond, *Caiaphas*, 138. Caiaphas and Annas are presumably part of the group of chief priests and officers that bring Jesus before Pilate (18:35; 19:6, 15). Neither man, how-

present during the events in front of and inside Pilate's praetorium, namely neither the *Pharisaioi* nor the *ochlos*, the Jewish crowd:¹⁴

They took him to the praetorium, the administrative seat of the procurator of the province of Judea. *They*: the police group and those who were present at the interrogation by Annas and Caiaphas. *They* are the *Judeans* of the following sections. They are very *specific* Judeans; for the understanding of what follows, this "they" is of vital importance. The Perushim are not there, nor is the crowd arguing about whether or not Jesus was the Messiah. There is no crowd (*ochlos*) before the praetorium. It is very specific members of the people who want to see Jesus on the cross. John was not an anti-Judaist or even an anti-Semite! He was very much an enemy of the Judean leadership and their satellites.

In several places it is apparent that you are not aware of the absence of the *ochlos* in the scenes before the Praetorium, for example (76) when you state in a review of Nikos Kazantzakis' novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, that "Kazantzakis does not place Caiaphas among the crowd that shouts 'Crucify him,'" while according to you, (136) Cecil B. DeMille's film *The King of Kings* deviates from the Gospel of John:

When Pilate asks "Shall I crucify your king?" it is Caiaphas, not the crowd (as it is in John 19:15), who declares, "We have no King but Caesar."

It is true that in John's Gospel Caiaphas does not appear here, but neither does the *ochlos*, the Jewish crowd, but only a mob incited by priests. And even if you use "crowd" here not as a translation of *ochlos*, but as a designation for this very mob, it is not *the latter* making this statement, but John explicitly attributes it to the *priests*.

3 Differentiated View of Caiaphas in the Jesus Film *The Nazarene* by Sholem Asch

I am intrigued by your description (89) of Sholem Asch's film *The Nazarene*.¹⁵ Asch was among the European and American Jews in the early 20th century when (93-94)

Jesus could be seen as a Jewish brother, and the language of crucifixion and Christian martyrdom could be used to describe the Jewish experience of anti-Semitism and persecution. Theologically some Jews were ready to reclaim Jesus as a Jew, by emphasizing that Christianity as such was a later development.

14 ever, is mentioned by name; they have once again taken their place among Jesus' enemies. Veerkamp 2021, 351 ([Simon's Discipleship. Jesus before the Great Priest](#), par. 17). The word "Perushim" in Veerkamp's quote is the Aramaic term for *Pharisaioi*, which is usually translated with the heavily misused word "Pharisees."

15 Sholem Asch, *The Nazarene*, Translated by Maurice Samuel. New York: Putnam, 1939.

Ton Veerkamp also tries to follow such a path from the Christian side: To understand Jesus as a Jew, who, however, argues with his Jewish brothers and sisters in sharp words about his claim to be the Messiah.

However, while in Veerkamp's eyes the Jewish Messianic evangelist John rejects the Hellenistic Roman culture as well as the Rabbinic Jews, Sholem Asch apparently takes it for granted that Jesus is not a Jewish Messiah who wants to bring about a this-worldly age of peace but a Hellenistic savior who saves human souls into heaven. I conclude this, among other things, (93) from his account of the "fierce internal conflict" [Asch, 440] "between the Greek and Jewish worlds," with which Joseph of Arimathea has to contend in his novel. "His strict adherence to the tradition of his people had by no means killed in him the inclination toward the brilliant world of the gentiles." You yourself wonder (93) whether "Joseph's struggle would have rung true to Hellenized Jews like Philo of Alexandria."

In my eyes, John is not describing Hellenized Jews as secret followers of Jesus, but rather Rabbinic Jews with inclinations toward Messianism, which, however, they again cast doubt on. And where *Hellēnes tines*, "some Greeks," come into view in 12:20, they have to join the end of the queue, so to speak, in the gathering of all Israel, including the Samaritans and the Jews from the Diaspora.

Sholem Asch's view (94) of the high priest Caiaphas is pleasantly differentiated in your eyes:

For Asch, Caiaphas is not an unscrupulous politician intent on ridding the world of Jesus but a complex individual with the unenviable task of mediating between an oppressed and unruly populace and the empire that would keep them in check. Neither is first-century Judaea a society divided between the poor who long for a savior to deliver them from Roman rule and the authority figures—priests, scribes, Pharisees—who collaborate with Rome in oppressing their people.

In a similar way, Ton Veerkamp¹⁶ views the confusing political situation in Judea of the 1st century. However, according to John, the Messiah Jesus must primarily fight a battle with the Roman world order, but at the same time has to deal with those Judeans (priests, Pharisees, Zealots) whom he would have trusted from the Jewish Scriptures to support his Messianic struggle, instead of playing (in various ways) into the hands of the Roman adversary.

16 See Veerkamp 2021, 9 ([Contradictions](#), par. 6).

4 How to Reduce the anti-Semitic Potential of the Passion Plays in Oberammergau?

Regarding your in-depth comments on the Passion plays in Oberammergau (117), I will only address the attempts of directors Christian Stückl and Otto Huber to reduce “the play's anti-Semitic potential.”

In addition to ensuring that Jesus was portrayed unequivocally as a Jew, the script accentuated the role of Pilate as the dictatorial representative of the Roman Empire. Stückl and Huber created an analogy between the situation in first-century Judaea and that of Vichy France and asked the actors to imagine Pilate as a Goebbels-like figure, with Caiaphas akin to Marshal Pétain... This captured the directors' sense that Caiaphas was caught between the needs and demands of his own people, including other leaders who put pressure on him, and the Roman governor, to whom he owed his position, livelihood, and perhaps his very life. Both emphases—Jesus' Jewishness and the colonial situation—created a new narrative framework in which the conflict between Caiaphas and Jesus was an inter-Jewish matter, not one between Judaism and Christianity that had to be understood in the context of Roman domination.

In its main features, this is the political background Veerkamp assumes for the original Gospel of John. In doing so, he explicitly emphasizes that this is by no means objective historiography, but an interest-led description and interpretation of past events from his Jewish-Messianic perspective at the end of the 1st century:¹⁷

So we have here *fiction*, no *reality*, no historical documentation. We have no documents, no trial record, no eyewitness evidence that such a trial took place. It is even questionable whether the authorities, Judean and Roman, would have made much of a fuss with any Galilean fanatic in their eyes, for instance, through a public trial. Romans everywhere used to make short work—that is, without any trial—with suspected rebels. We know nothing.

But we have four narratives. Here we are told: A political leadership delivers a disliked member of the people to an occupying power in order not to jeopardize its business basis for a proper and probably profitable relationship with the occupying power. It is not the task of an interpretation to establish historical facts, especially since the endeavor would be futile. Its task is to interpret the narrative in its internal contexts and to place it in a known socio-political context of contradiction. This is true for the Gospel as a whole and even more so for the Passion narrative. It cannot do more but at least it should do this.

17 Veerkamp 2021, 353-54 ([“What is fidelity, anyhow?”](#), par. 6-7).

4.1 Distribution of Roles between Caiaphas and Pilate in the Gospel of John

The way the roles are distributed between Caiaphas and Pilate in the script for Oberammergau 2010, however, explicitly contradicts the view of the Gospel of John (117-18):

In the script Caiaphas's difficult position comes through quite clearly. In act 2, scene 2, it is Pilate who expresses both knowledge of and concern about Jesus' activities. Jesus has already come to Caiaphas's attention, but he feigns disinterest and downplays Jesus' potential to sow dissatisfaction and create disorder. To Caiaphas's confident declaration that Jesus "is only an insignificant itinerant preacher," Pilate exclaims: "Insignificant? The entire city flows toward him. ... Your mouth has apparently been sealed by admiration. Caiaphas, do I need to remind you: it is always such insignificant itinerant preachers who instigate revolt and rioting under the guise of divine mission and bring people to religious fanaticism."

For John, such an assessment of the two protagonists would have been unrealistic. In his eyes, Pilate could not understand the nature of his kingdom of freedom and justice for Israel in the midst of the nations, which (18:36) is "not of this world order." In this regard, Ton Veerkamp writes:¹⁸

Pilate did not understand that Jesus wanted an absolute alternative to the Roman world order. And if he had already understood this, he could not have recognized any acute political danger in him. Jesus has no desire to have divisions or legions. Such do-gooders may be annoying, but they are not dangerous. It would be best to negate him and let him go, "I find no cause at all for a trial against him." The Judeans have a different view. They know about the danger posed by Jesus and those like him. They know the Scriptures and know what political force traditionalism represents in Judea.

In this respect, John certainly blames the Judean leadership for handing Jesus over to the Roman occupying power. However, this does not mean that he excuses Rome compared to the Jewish opponents of Jesus. Rather, he is interested in showing that a Jewish leadership that gets involved with the Roman *diabulos*, even thinks it can extort him (19:12, "If you release this one, you are no friend of Caesar"), must ultimately lose.

John does not brand all the Judeans—not even the oppositional Pharisees who opposed Jesus throughout the Gospel—but only the priestly leadership (including the henchmen they incited) as those who want to see Jesus on the cross and who thus make themselves politically hopelessly dependent on Rome. He also does not have Caiaphas appear in this scene. Here, those who put his advice (11:49-52) into action

18 Veerkamp 2021, 359-60 ("[There, the Human,](#)" par. 2).

come into play, but apparently not with the prudence and foresight that John ascribed to the high priest:¹⁹

Now Pilate shows that he was the more savvy politician after all. He faces a popular assembly that was not one. The Perushim, the official opposition, are absent. Only the priestly elites and their staff are present. The whole thing is a democratically dressed-up farce.

Now he doesn't say, "Look at the man," now he says, "There, your king." They roar, "Upwards, upwards, crucify him." Pilate demands the "democratic" legitimacy of the death sentence, "Your king shall I crucify?" He has them where he wants them. The leading priests—not the people of the Judeans—say, "We have no king except Caesar." What they probably don't realize is that they are solemnly declaring that they want a *melekh ke-khol-ha-goyim, basileia tou kosmou toutou*, a king according to this world order. This is the political price that Pilate demands from them. So they do.

Of course, it is doubtful whether such analyses of what John might have originally meant could in any way help to counter the anti-Semitic overtones of a Passion play like the one at Oberammergau, especially since these are due less to subtleties of content than (122) to "the impact of dramatization itself" or to "historical situations in which audiences of these plays all too readily saw a direct connection between the Jewish deicides on the stage and the Jewish residents of their own towns and villages."

4.2 Why is the Innocent Jesus to Die in Place of the Criminal Barabbas?

For Oberammergau in 2010, at any rate, you note that

the Roman governor is a more sympathetic character than Caiaphas, at least in his wish to release Jesus rather than Barabbas. In contrast to fiction, however, these plays do not portray Caiaphas as a complex figure who might have had some ambivalence about handing a fellow Jew over to the Romans for execution. Caiaphas remains a deicide.

And again, you are right that it is impossible to explain clearly in a passion play why John includes the episode with Barabbas in his Gospel. Is it possible to show any other reaction to the demand that he be released than being outraged that an innocent man should be executed in place of a criminal?

Historically, it is unlikely that the Romans would have released an outlaw on the occasion of Passover. According to Ton Veerkamp, John uses this idea to strongly warn his contemporaries against Zealot-militant adventures that had led to the destruction of Jerusalem in the Judean War. Thus he makes comprehensible John's judg-

19 Veerkamp 2021, 368 ([King of the Judeans](#), par. 2-3).

ment of Zealot Jews, not without pointing out that even the followers of Jesus themselves by no means prove to be convinced pacifists in their deeds. In John's eyes, Pilate was a "shrewd politician" who proposed "a horse-trade" to the Judeans:²⁰

He had another political prisoner, a certain Barabbas, a *lēstēs*, "terrorist." Mark 15:7 adds that Barabbas was captured on the occasion of an insurrection in which a murder was committed. Barabbas was most likely a Zealot, a militant fighter for a Judea where the Torah will have unlimited validity. Pilate invokes an alleged customary law by which the authorities can release a prisoner. This customary law is asserted by our Gospels, but there is no other evidence for this assertion. For the narrative, however, it is an important element.

Rome confronts the Judeans with the choice of demanding a harmless, non-Zealot, in Rome's eyes "non-violent" do-gooder, the so-called "Prince (*Nazorean*), King of the Judeans," or a violent freedom fighter who poses a far greater danger to them. But they demand Barabbas. The devout Christians are outraged here: the Jews want a merciless murderer instead of a gentle Son of God. But the text is not moral; it is political. These Judeans have indeed engaged in the armed struggle; they have indeed chosen Barabbas.

The Messianists who referred to Jesus disagreed, John says. You may doubt this, you even have to, as long as you stay on the level of the narrative. Simon Peter drew the sword, he wanted the fight, the armed fight. Only after the catastrophic outcome of the *Judean War*, that is, only in the present time of the narrator, the spokesmen of these Messianists, that is, Matthew, Mark, etc., have been finally cured of their sympathies for the Zealots. Therefore, they weave into their narrative the incident surrounding the release of Barabbas to make it impossible for their communities to have any flirtation with the Zealots, who were politically active even after the war.

5 Jesus and Caiaphas between the Poles of Judaism and Hellenism

In your chapter "Caiaphas in Historiography" (144), you turn once again to the way New Testament scholars have placed Caiaphas in their narratives. In doing so, you find that not only "in nonhistoriographical genres of literature and artistic expression," but also in scholarship "the overall paucity of detail allows Caiaphas to be molded into whatever sort of personage is required for the particular Jesus narrative being told."

20 Veerkamp 2021, 360 (["There, the Human,"](#) par. 3-5).

The narrative imperative, therefore, is a major force in the depiction of Caiaphas. Narratives are shaped by the need for coherence, that is, a cause-and-effect relationship between events, but also by the perspectives, values, beliefs, and ideas of the artist or author. A Jesus story told from a political perspective will place Caiaphas within the fraught relationship between Rome and Judaea and speculate as to how the colonial situation would have affected the high priest's relationships with Pilate on the one hand and Jesus on the other. A story told from a cosmological perspective will assign Caiaphas a role within the struggle between God and Satan.

In this context, you point out (146) “that from the vantage point of modern scholarship, there are two distinct stories that take place on the soil of first-century Judaea—the story of Jesus and the story of the Jewish revolt—and for many these two stories barely intersect.” A hallmark of the Amsterdam School, which includes Ton Veerkamp, Andreas Bedenbender, Gerhard Jankowski, and others,²¹ is to connect the two stories by understanding the Judean War as the causal background from which the Gospel literature emerged.

In this chapter, I am particularly interested in your consideration (152) of scholarly designs that situate “Caiaphas's actions in the particular political, social, and economic structures of the Roman Empire.” E. P. Sanders²² and Paula Fredriksen²³ do not assume explicit political intentions of Jesus, according to them (153) “Caiaphas responded not to any particular element in Jesus' teaching but only to the potential for havoc that his presence and activities in Jerusalem created.” Other scholars—you refer to Marcus Borg,²⁴ John Dominic Crossan,²⁵ Bart Ehrman²⁶ and John Meier²⁷—(153-54)

view Caiaphas's actions as motivated not only by a desire to maintain order, but also by Jesus' direct challenge to the various hierarchies in which the high priest was involved. Jesus' challenge incorporated the essence of his social

21 See [Cosmology of liberation struggle against the world order](#).

22 E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. New York: Penguin, 1996.

23 Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity*. New York: Knopf, 1999.

24 Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus*. Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity. New York: Mellen, 1984.

25 John Dominic Crossan, “Itinerants and Householders in the Earliest Jesus Movement.” In *Whose Historical Jesus?* ed. William E. Arnal and Michel Robert Desjardins, 7-24. Waterloo, Ont.: Published for the Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion by Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997.

26 Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus. Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

27 John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Anchor Bible Reference Library. New York: Doubleday, 1991.

message, namely, a concern for the poor, the rural, and the colonized. For this reason Jesus inevitably and indeed intentionally came into conflict with the high priest, who represented the rich, urban Jewish leadership in collaboration with the Roman oppressor.

I wonder why you do not refer to such authors in other books, since these starting points do question some of your theses put forward there.

Other authors (154) present

Caiaphas's condemnation of Jesus ... not only in the hierarchies and power politics of Roman occupation but in a much broader, explicitly religious, framework: the opposition between Judaism and Hellenism. In this scenario the crucifixion is the tragic outcome of a far-reaching conflict between pure untainted Judaism, represented by Jesus, and corrupt and materialistic Hellenism, represented by Caiaphas.

5.1 David Flusser and the Conflict between Pharisees and Sadducees

Very extensively, you deal in this context with David Flusser,²⁸ who “couples the opposition between Judaism and Hellenism tightly to the opposition between the Pharisees and the Sadducees in the post-Maccabean period.” For Flusser, the Sadducees and the high priest as their highest representative (155) are “the antithesis of a humane Jewish faith that is represented both by Jesus and by the Pharisees, who, though not identical with the later rabbis, should be seen as their spiritual predecessors.” [68] In this exaggeration, however, he does not explain why the Sadducees are not even mentioned in John's Gospel, nor for what reasons the Pharisees or Jews, in general, receive such sharp criticism.

5.2 N. T. Wright and Caiaphas as the New Antiochus Epiphanes

For N. T. Wright²⁹ Caiaphas has become virtually “the new Antiochus Epiphanes, the great tyrant oppressing YHWH's people,” whereas “Jesus is to be vindicated as the true representative of YHWH's people.” [525-26] In his (155) “massive study, *Jesus and the Victory of God*,” he draws lines from “the story of Hanukkah in which the underdog Maccabean warriors succeeded in resisting the imposition of Hellenistic religion engineered by Antiochus IV and his Jewish collaborators” to “Jesus and his compatriots [who] would have seen this story not only as an important element of their people's history but also as a paradigm of or analogy to their own situation under Roman rule.”

28 David Flusser und R. Steven Notley, *Jesus*. Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997.

29 N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Christian Origins and the Question of God 2. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996, 525-26.

However, you rightly doubt that Caiaphas himself can be accused of such an abominable desecration of the Jerusalem temple as Antiochus. Apart from this, while John refers to traditions from Maccabean times, he definitely does not share the Zealot fervor of those who called upon the Maccabees (or on militant versions of the hope for the Son of David) in his time, directed toward military action against the Romans. Nor does John describe Jesus' crucifixion as a martyrdom that he would have taken upon himself because of a compulsion to violate norms of the Torah. Rather it is a consequence of the popularity he has among the Jews as the Messiah of Israel, which leads the priests, on the advice of Caiaphas, to hand Jesus over to the Roman governor.

Although (157) Wright's assessment is correct that Jesus "was a first-century Jew, not a twentieth-century liberal," [609] in his analysis, which he probably judges to be historically accurate even for Jesus and Caiaphas, he obsesses too much on a correspondence with the Maccabean period that does not exist in this clarity.

Reasonably you emphasize: "One would think ... that the Roman emperor, or even Pilate, and not the Jewish high priest would take on the role of Antiochus IV." And in a later place, you object to "the Judaism versus Hellenism framework" (160) primarily that it

places an insupportable burden upon Caiaphas himself. If Caiaphas were indeed a second Antiochus Epiphanes, as Wright calls him, one might have expected him to do all he could to insinuate Greek language and Hellenistic culture into the "pure" Judaism of first-century Palestine. One might have expected him to establish a gymnasium right under the citadel; to induce Jewish young men to wear the Greek hat, as did the high priest Jason according to 2 Maccabees 4:12; to advocate the removing of the marks of circumcision; and to abandon the holy covenant, as did the Hellenizers described in 1 Maccabees 1:13-15, or raid the Temple sanctuary for his own enrichment, plunder the city, persecute its Jewish inhabitants, install Gentile cults, and burn the books of the law, as Antiochus IV is described as doing in 1 Maccabees 1:20-56. But the primary sources provide no support for the notion that Caiaphas either imposed or promoted Hellenization in any form.

In this, as I said, you are undoubtedly right. John, as Ton Veerkamp interprets him, does not raise such reproaches against Caiaphas either, but rather, apart from the pursuit of understandable interests of the Judean ruling classes, he concedes that he has in mind the preservation of the autonomous status of Judea and the Jerusalem temple and is even able to speak prophetically by virtue of his office as high priest, even if against his will. The true enemy of the Johannine Jesus is the Roman adversary, to whom, however, according to 19:15 the Judean priesthood has submitted. But even these statements cannot claim any evidential value concerning the historical Caiaphas.

5.3 Martin Hengel and the Hellenization of Judaism in the 1st Century

In general, you are surprised (157) that “the sharp opposition between Judaism and Hellenism that emerges in the work of Wright and others” refers back to what you see as a “distinction that was evicted from the standard narratives of Second Temple Judaism some thirty years ago.” Until the 1960s it was “not uncommon to encounter the assertion that Judaism remained untainted by Hellenism,” for which you cite Günther Bornkamm’s *Jesus of Nazareth*³⁰ as evidence. But there were already

significant studies from the 1930s through the 1960s that undermined the sharp distinction between Judaism and Hellenism,³¹ arguably the most influential for New Testament scholarship was the work of Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, first published in German in 1969.

In Hengel’s eyes, (158)

all of the major groups of Second Temple Judaism that emerged from that conflict [the Maccabean revolt in circa 165-66 B.C.E.], that is, the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes, were strongly influenced by Hellenism. “For this reason,” says Hengel, “the distinction between ‘Palestinian’ Judaism and the ‘Hellenistic’ Judaism of the Greek-speaking Diaspora, which has been customary for so long, now becomes very questionable. Strictly speaking, for the Hellenistic Roman period the Judaism of the mother country must just as much be included under the heading ‘Hellenistic Judaism’ as that of the western Diaspora.” [311-12]

One page later (159), however, you concede that even Hengel himself “limits the most powerful effects of Hellenization to those he refers to as the Jewish upper classes.” Many scholars argue against Hengel’s conclusions, for example, Géza Vermès³² or E. P. Sanders.³³

Correct about Hengel’s analysis is an insight formulated by Ton Veerkamp in his interpretation of John 6:15 when Jesus resists being proclaimed king by Zealot-minded followers after the sign of feeding Israel:³⁴

In any case, John here gets even with a kind of messianism that is guided by the political goal of a monarchy independent of Rome. There has been an independent monarchy under the kings from the house of Judah Maccabee. It

30 Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*. New York: Harper, 1960, 29.

31 (223, n. 70) See the excellent survey by Lee I. Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity: Conflict or Confluence?* Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998, 6-15.

32 Géza Vermès, *Jesus and the World of Judaism*. London: SCM, 1983, 26.

33 E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE-66 CE*. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992, 22.

34 Veerkamp 2021, 155 ([The Sign of the Nourishment of Israel. A Misunderstanding](#), par. 15).

could become nothing else but a kingdom like all the others. As long as nothing really changes in the condition of the world order as such, you could expect nothing else but royal business as usual. The catastrophic century 63 BCE (capture of Jerusalem by the Romans under Pompeius) to 70 CE (destruction of the city by the Romans under Titus) had to be the necessary consequence of a policy which the people of John 6:14 expect from the Messiah: a king and all will be well. Nothing became well, even with a king Jesus nothing would have become well.

The fact that the whole of Palestine absorbed Hellenistic influences, however, does not argue against the existence of anti-Hellenistic or specifically anti-Roman groups. There were messianic and apocalyptic movements, there were the rebels of the Judean War. Even today, anti-Western movements, such as Islamism, naturally draw on the technical and cultural achievements of the Western world; indeed, there is even the thesis that fundamentalist movements are not traditional at their core, but must be seen as children of the modern age against which they protest.³⁵

5.4 John Dominic Crossan and Jesus as a Cynic Itinerant Preacher

J. D. Crossan³⁶ takes a particular path in this context (159). His

Jesus is an itinerant Cynic Jewish philosopher who traveled the hills and dales of Galilee with his followers, teaching “free healing and common eating, religious and economic egalitarianism” to rural Galilean peasants. [422] Yet Crossan too must finally account for the fact that one Hellenized Jew, Caiaphas, plotted against the life of another Hellenized Jew, Jesus. He does so by positing a distinction between exclusivism and inclusivism within Hellenistic

35 Arnulf von Scheliha, *Beobachterbericht zum Forum: Fundamentalistische Abgrenzungsdiskurse im Christentum und im Islam*. In: Hansjörg Schmid, Andreas Renz, Jutta Sperber, Duran Terzi (Hrsg.): *Identität durch Differenz? Wechselseitige Abgrenzungen in Christentum und Islam*, Regensburg 2007, 220-224, here 223:

Religious fundamentalists thus seek out the "breaking points" that arise in the course of the necessary updating of traditions in religions. In this respect, fundamentalisms could also be interpreted as a side effect of the modernization of religions, which become politically significant precisely when the social and economic framework conditions contain explosive power. In this perspective, religious fundamentalisms would be accompanying and reflective figures of the liberalization of religions... They are contradictory in their attempt to close themselves off, because they distance themselves from a counterpart from which they nevertheless live by referring to it critically. In their surpassing radicalism, however, they draw attention to the fact that every religious identity formation must live with differences and thematize and process them as differences.

36 John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.

Judaism itself. Crossan defines this difference on the basis of exclusive and inclusive reactions to Hellenism.

It is interesting, in my eyes, that

his distinctions between exclusive and inclusive Judaism correspond rather neatly to the distinctions between Judaism and Hellenism as drawn by both Flusser and Wright. Exclusive Judaism means a Judaism seeking to preserve its ancient traditions as conservatively as possible with minimal conjunction with Hellenism; inclusive Judaism is that form of Judaism that sought to adapt its ancestral customs as liberally as possible with maximal association, combination, or collaboration with Hellenism. [418]

Crossan's interpretive move subsumes the Judaism/Hellenism dichotomy into his framework of a Hellenized Jewish Palestine. In doing so he can have it both ways: he can accept the evidence for Hellenization in first-century Palestine and still retain the crucial opposition of elements within Judaism as an explanation for the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities headed by Caiaphas.

If I interpret Crossan correctly, he arrives at conclusions that are at least completely opposite to those of Wright, for to Wright, Jesus would be a traditionalist Jew, eager to distance himself from Hellenistic doings, while the Cynic Jesus, in Crossan's sense, would be more open to Hellenistic influences. His approach, however, is based primarily on the literature of sayings recorded in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, rather than on the Gospel of John.

5.5 Hans Dieter Betz and Jesus' Anti-Hellenism in Hellenistic Influenced Gospels

Finally (160), you address Hans Dieter Betz,³⁷ who "repeatedly asserts the opposition between Jesus the Jew and Hellenism," although at the same time he assumes that "the Christian gospel writers ... were Hellenists themselves" and "have done their best to tone down these anti-Hellenistic sentiments." Literally, he writes [130]: "The fact that Jesus was crucified as a messianic revolutionary is a sure indication of his anti-Roman and thus anti-Hellenistic attitude." You object that he (161) does not contribute "evidence or even argument for Hellenism as a corrupting force."

In contrast, I doubt that Matthew or John may be considered representatives of primarily Hellenistic thinking. While Matthew does have the Gentile mission in mind, his original goal is to have the nations learn the Torah. John is originally concerned with the gathering of all Israel, while "some Greeks" merely play a secondary role—a fact you disagree with.³⁸

37 Hans Dieter Betz, "Hellenism." In *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 127-35. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

38 See [Was Gentile Mission an Original Purpose of John?](#)

5.6 Is the anti-Hellenistic True Jew Jesus to Replace an anti-Jewish Jesus?

For “the persistence of the Judaism/Hellenism opposition” you also see another, more subtle, subliminal reason.

It seems to me that the opposition between Judaism and Hellenism around which some of the recent historical Jesus accounts are built functions as a substitute for an older and now discredited opposition, namely, that between Jesus and Judaism.

Exegetes like Günther Bornkamm³⁹ had known that “only a criticism blinded by racial ideologies could deny the Jewish origin of Jesus,” but still (161) set him “apart from his Jewish compatriots.”

Bornkamm declares that “Jesus’s attitude to the law ... his concern about the people and his behaviour towards tax collectors and sinners, which was offensive to all pious Jews, prove that he stands in a complete contrast to these separate circles of the ‘righteous,’ as well as to the representatives of official Judaism.” [43] Jesus is also completely unlike the various messianic rebel movements to which Josephus attests. [44]

In contrast, some exegetes today try to be politically correct by making Jesus the true Jew and the Jews Gentiles who have fallen apart from Judaism (161-62):

Transforming the opposition between Jesus and Judaism into a conflict between Jesus, the representative and champion of pure Judaism, and Caiaphas the Hellenized Sadducean high priest of Roman Palestine, not only takes care of the problems of the Jewish Jesus and apparently avoids anti-Semitism, but also maintains the traditional warm image of Jesus as the watchdog of the poor and oppressed rural peasants.

5.7 Martin Hengel and a Jewish Law Rigorism that Closes itself to Jesus’ Gospel

However, what speaks against this, in your eyes, (162) is that Jesus apparently did not find enough followers in precisely this Jewish underclass, but that the majority of Jews opposed the developing Christian church:

For the proponents of this construction, however, one problem remains: the obvious fact that the rural, poor, and pure Jews for whom Jesus battled the Hellenistic enemy apparently did not appreciate his sacrifice on their behalf.

39 (224, n. 84) Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 53. Bornkamm is here referring to the theory of the “Aryan Jesus.” See p. 199n2. For a detailed and fascinating discussion of the “rehabilitation” of Jesus by theologians in Nazi Germany, see Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2008.

Accounts of the historical Jesus must have at least one eye on the history of the early church, which eventually became a separate and to some extent antagonistic entity with respect to the majority of Jews.

If I understand you correctly, you again find in Hengel an answer to this problem, which I try to paraphrase as follows: precisely because the Jewish lower classes “reacted against the Hellenization of the upper classes by fixating rigidly on the law,” they could also misunderstand the “critique of law” expressed by the Jesus movement only “in analogy to the attempt of the Hellenistic reformers in the time of Antiochus, as an attack on the Israelite faith or apostasy to polytheism.”

“Jesus of Nazareth, Stephen, Paul came to grief among their own people because the Jews were no longer in a position to bring about a creative, self-critical transformation of the piety of the law with its strongly national and political colouring.” [306]

This contrast between the liberating gospel and an exclusively demanding and condemning Jewish law I myself know well from my student days and my first years as a pastor.

Thus Hengel resorts to the familiar portrayal of postexilic Judaism as a narrow and indeed petrified version of ancient Israelite religion.⁴⁰

5.8 Ton Veerkamp and Various Jewish-Messianic Ways to Overcome the Roman World Order

Ton Veerkamp does not represent such a view at all. He understands the Torah as a liberating guideline of the God of Israel, which, however, according to Paul and the evangelists, is no longer functioning under the rule of a worldwide house of slavery.⁴¹ It is no longer possible to emigrate from the territory of an enslaving Egypt to a Promised Land in order to live there, according to the Torah of the God of Israel, separated from the peoples.

Paul and the evangelists represent different prescriptions for overcoming the Roman world order. Paul (and in his succession also Luke) wants to overcome the separation from the nations through the reconciliation of Jews and *goyim* in the body of the Messiah, the Messianic community. Matthew dreams of schooling the *goyim* in the Torah, and John of gathering all Israel into the Messianic community of the beloved disciple.

All these concepts were bound to fail in the course of the transformation of the Jewish-Messianic Jesus-following groupings into a Gentile-Christian dominated church,

40 (224, n. 90) Cf. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 37.

41 See Veerkamp 2013 and my summaries of his chapters about [Paul: People and Nations—Torah Impracticable](#) and the gospels [From the Gospels to the Making of Christianity](#).

as differently accented intra-Jewish disputes about the Messiah Jesus turned into a bitter dispute between two different religions, among which Christianity claimed to have disinherited Judaism, which in turn had killed the true Son of God Jesus.⁴²

6 The Narrative Imperative of the Gospels and the Condemnation of Caiaphas

In summary, you write about the historical judgments made by exegetes about Caiaphas (163):

Those who see Jesus primarily as the son of God sent to redeem humankind view Caiaphas as a near-demonic figure who carries out Satan's determined but ultimately unsuccessful plan to undermine God's saving activity in and for the world. Those who see Jesus as the champion of the poor and oppressed lower classes perceive Caiaphas as the wealthy and powerful Sadducee who was as much an instrument of oppression as the Roman Empire itself.

You attribute it to "the narrative imperative," which demands "to create a coherent narrative in which the events are tied together by the principle of cause and effect," that Caiaphas had to be given the role of handing Jesus over to the Romans. For only the Romans could inflict the punishment of crucifixion, and only an upper-class Jew could gain Pilate's ear.

Throughout history, hardly anyone would have been interested in Caiaphas (203) if it were not for this "narrative logic" that ascribes "Caiaphas a prominent place in the story of Jesus' Passion."

Stories need villains, without whom there would be no heroes. In the Jesus story, the hero, Jesus, dies, and the villain, Caiaphas, is the agent of his death. The hero is the son of God, and the villain is associated with the devil.

Since there would be no resurrection without Jesus' crucifixion, Caiaphas is, on the one hand, "a crucial player without whom Christianity as such would not exist." On the other hand, except in your book, he is only

a secondary character in almost all other works in which he appears. For most Caiaphas is important not for his own sake but because he can be drafted to fill in an important causal gap in Jesus' story: how and why did it come to pass that a Roman governor ordered the crucifixion of a Galilean itinerant? Those who see Jesus primarily as the son of God sent to redeem the world may view Caiaphas as a near-demonic figure who carries out Satan's determined but ultimately unsuccessful plan to undermine God's will for humankind. Those who

42 See [Grand Narrative—Messianistically interpreted, From the Pastoral Epistles to Justin and Ignatius](#) and [Pseudo-Barnabas and Diognet Letter](#).

see Jesus as the champion of the poor and oppressed lower classes may consider Caiaphas the wealthy and powerful Sadducee who was as much an instrument of oppression as the Roman Empire itself.

Indeed, you put your finger on the wound of any narrative imperative that tends to be black-and-white in the distribution of roles within a story. However, even a classic film like [“The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly”](#) has distinguished between different facets of evil, and it is worthwhile, at least in the Christian effort to interpret the Bible for preaching purposes, to take a similarly discriminating (and also critical) approach to the expressive intentions of the evangelists against their respective contemporary historical backgrounds.

According to Ton Veerkamp, the evangelist John sees the high priest Caiaphas as a clever realpolitik politician who acts in the interest of both the autonomy of Judea and the Judean ruling classes and sells his decision to sacrifice Jesus well in terms of propaganda (see section 4.2). For John, however, Caiaphas is already the representative of a past that goes back two generations. More sharply, John criticizes the Pharisees, from whom Rabbinic Judaism emerged in his time.

In Veerkamp’s eyes, these Rabbis, who are unwilling to tolerate the Jesus Messianic agitation in the synagogues, hold legitimate interests that John, in his sectarian enthusiasm for Jesus and because of the increasingly irreconcilable hostilities, is unable to perceive. In interpreting John 15:25, “They hated me for no reason at all,” Veerkamp addresses why, for John, the hatred of the rabbinical Jews is harder to bear than the hatred of the Roman world order.⁴³

Without reason, *chinnam, dōrean*, in Israel is always a very serious reproach. Thus the Book of Job accuses the God of his fate of devouring the righteous without reason.

Rome’s hatred against the Messiah is not justified, but it is reasoned. This can be understood. The hatred of the synagogue is not rationally comprehensible to John. They have only “pretexts” (*prophaseis*) for this hateful fight. If the Messiah had not done these works, then ...! But now it says with the psalm [109:5], “Hatred instead of my love.”

If anywhere, it is clear here that a rational discussion of political paths between ecclesia and synagogue has not been conducted; both are irrational for each other. In the case of Rome, you might understand this; it has reasons to “fight the Messiah with hatred.” But the Judeans. They have seen the works, “which no one else has done.” They fight him and us, says John, “without reason.”

43 Veerkamp 2021, 314-15 ([The Fight](#), par. 18-21).

We are not biased here. We only have to state that with the accusation “without reason” a conversation, let alone an understanding, becomes impossible. We observe that John does not want to look for reasons among his opponents—and the search for reasons on both sides would be the basic condition for a conversation between both sides. John, for his part, assumes without any reason (!) that Rabbinical Judaism cannot have any reasons. He makes no effort at all here. The interpretation must state what is irrational in the vocable *chinnam, dōrean*, without being a party to this conflict.

6.1 Half-hearted Attempts to Excuse the Attitude of Caiaphas

You devote your entire chapter 8 (165-179) to attempts at finding a possibly half-hearted excuse for Caiaphas’ delivering Jesus to Pilate. Above I had already mentioned in passing that it was not concern about Jesus’ activities in the temple based on which he felt compelled to take action against Jesus. Nor is it possible to affirm that Caiaphas had to do it because was in charge of maintaining order in Judea. Such notions exist, in your view (164), “only through the imaginative gapfilling activity undertaken under pressure of the narrative imperative itself.”

True, one might conclude (168) from John 11:49-52 that “the high priest saw the potential for disorder or unrest as a consequence of Jesus’ activities in Judaea and that he had a plan, indeed a plot, for tackling the situation.” But (169)

the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ trial before Pilate create a rather different impression. ...

In this part of the story, then, Caiaphas plays no role directly at all, nor do the chief priests and elders take on the task of keeping order that scholars attribute to the high priest. Rather these groups pit themselves against Pilate, who desires only to release Jesus. The stories suggest that the main motivation of the chief priests and elders is to ensure Jesus’ death, not to maintain order. ... What might have begun as a conflict between two factions within the Judaeen people—those who favored Jesus and those who feared him—has turned into a riot against Roman rule. Where is Caiaphas when his mediating services are so sorely needed? The New Testament evidence suggests that Rome did not after all rely on the high priest to maintain order at this particular Passover celebration; Pilate alone decided that he had better give in to the restless crowd rather than release Jesus.

Apparently, it cannot actually be proven for exactly what reasons the historical Caiaphas could have handed the historical Jesus over to the historical Pilate—assuming he had actually done so. We can only ask what view of these persons the evangelists held. John knows Jesus in a diametrical antagonism to the Roman world order, represented by its governor Pilate, and at the same time directs his harshest accusations against the leadership of its own Judean people, which for the sake of its own

interests, connected with the autonomous status of the Judean *ethnos*, and only propagandistically of the Judean people, *laos*, submits to the Roman adversary, *diabolos*.

6.2 Does a Condemnation of Caiaphas Affect All Jews and Judaism as a Whole?

Finally, you deal with an argument that has been put to you by colleagues (204-05), namely

that Caiaphas should not be identified with the Jews, nor they with him. As a collaborator with Rome, Caiaphas stood apart from his people. For this reason negative portraits of Caiaphas as a wicked deicide are not anti-Semitic and should not be read as such. This point is sometimes bolstered with historical arguments: ordinary Jews of Jesus' own time disliked, distrusted, or repudiated the high priesthood; as a member of the ruling class, Caiaphas did not represent the views of the populace; as a Sadducee he was more Hellenized and therefore more sympathetic to Greco-Roman culture than the rest of the population.

These are not unreasonable points; first-century Jewish society was characterized by considerable religious, economic, and social diversity, in which tensions and factionalism were inevitable. Nevertheless for better or for worse, the high priest was seen by Jews—not only residents of Judaea but elsewhere, including the Diaspora—as well as by non-Jews as the head and therefore representative of the people Israel.

This reminds me of today's discussions about the difference between anti-Semitism and a criticism of the policies of the state of Israel. The fact is that the two are very easily intermingled. Arab Palestinians, for example, couple hatred of Jews with both experiences of oppression by Israelis and anti-colonial sentiments toward the United States.⁴⁴

It will not be possible to do justice to the real, historical Caiaphas in any way. In which way the Johannine or Matthean image of Caiaphas shows anti-Jewish traits or whether it originated within inner-Jewish and anti-colonial struggles and is thus at least comprehensible, however, has to be examined carefully in each case, even though you give reason to consider (205):

Ultimately, however, what matters is not how Caiaphas would have appeared to the Jews of his time, but how he has been construed by Christian audiences

44 Exactly on the day of publishing the English version of this book review, in the "Christian-Islamic Association Giessen," we are discussing in a committed and differentiated way how we as Christians and Muslims in Germany can take a stand on the Middle East conflict without using anti-Semitic patterns of argumentation.

who are the primary consumers of the high priest's depictions in all historical periods and in all media.

This is true, but if we as Christians want to continue to proclaim the Gospels as testimonies of our religion, I think it makes sense to take an interest in the 1st century and to offer today's Christians an interpretation of the Gospels that takes seriously the Jewish background of the Gospels and the movement of Jesus and critically counters their anti-Jewish implications.

6.3 Caiaphas between the Distorted Image of the Deicide and the High Priest of the Day of Atonement

In your 9th chapter, you summarize (201) that even the most

attempts to visualize the high priest Caiaphas, whether in words, in still images, on stage, or on film, ... depict an overbearing and often grotesque or buffoonish character, so threatened by and obsessed with Jesus that he will go to any length to have him killed.

Yet there are alternative ways of depiction, which are only used by a few, for example the concentration on his

cultic role, the magnificence of his vestments, the grandeur of his presence, and the profound spiritual role that his activities played in mediating the important processes of communal repentance and divine forgiveness that allowed Israel to remain in its covenantal relationship with God. These representations not only depict this role but also express the awe and amazement experienced by those who witnessed the high priest or imagined themselves doing so.

You end your book (205) with an urgent appeal:

In the absence of truly compelling and unequivocal evidence to the contrary, let us remember Caiaphas kindly. Let us acknowledge that neither the Evangelists nor Josephus knew exactly what he did or did not do during his long tenure as high priest. The only thing that we know for certain is that every year on Yom Kippur he would don his vestments and enter the Holy of Holies to atone for his sins and the sins of the entire people, thereby renewing Israel's covenantal relationship with God. Let us allow him to complete his prayers, emerge unharmed from the Holy of Holies, and remove and fold his vestments. Then let us rebury him in his shroud, replace his bones in his ossuary. From here on in, may he rest in peace.

I dare to add to these words that in this sense we could also take seriously what in my eyes Matthew really meant by the sentence he puts into the mouth of the Jews: "His blood come *reconciling* upon all the people of Israel."

In a sermon on April 14, 2006⁴⁵ I explained this in more detail:

This sentence has a double meaning: blood can come upon us in the sense of the bloody consequences of bloody deeds. According to Matthew, this happened to the Jews when Jerusalem was destroyed. But blood can also come upon us in the sense of the atoning blood of sacrificial animals, as it was understood in the Old Testament. In this sense, the blood of Jesus, shed by Jews and Gentiles, by high priests and Pilate, and figuratively by all of us, has a reconciling effect. ...

Now when the people (*laos*) of the Jews say, “Jesus’ blood come upon us,” it means that Jesus died also for the Jews who reject him.

Those who, like Pilate and the chief priests, do not take responsibility for the shed blood of Jesus, do not get rid of this responsibility. Whoever, like Judas and the people of the Jews, repents and confesses guilt, experiences forgiveness and reconciliation, no matter whether he is a Jew or a Christian or belongs to a completely different religion. Jesus died for all people.

I do not think, dear Mrs. Reinhartz, that we could completely agree about Caiaphas or about the Gospel of John as a whole. But perhaps you can understand in what way I as a Christian try to continue to take this book seriously as a book that belongs to my Holy Scripture, without further promoting hostility towards Jews.

I hope, with recourse to Ton Veerkamp, to have done justice to the picture of Caiaphas that John draws of him. As far as the historical Caiaphas is concerned, I would like to refrain from any judgment and entrust him to the mercy of God, in which I also know myself to be borne.

With high esteem for your extraordinarily inspiring book(s),
sincerely yours,
Helmut Schütz

45 [„Sein Blut komme über uns und unsere Kinder“](#). I see my interpretation confirmed by Gerhard Böhm, “Sein Blut über uns. Das Problem der antijudaistischen Projektion.” In: *Deutsches Pfarrerrinnen- und Pfarrerberblatt* 03/2021, S. 141-45. He writes on page 144 (translation mine):

In the verse “Then all the people answered and said, His blood upon us and upon our children,” there is not—as the anti-Judaistic exegesis thinks—a “self-cursing” of the whole Jewish people that *excludes Israel* but here Mt. gives an interpretation of Jesus’ passion that explicitly *includes Israel*, “the whole people” (*pas ho laos*) in the salvation of Jesus’ story.