

# ***Living with the Enemy: Why High Priest Joseph Caiaphas was not a Roman Collaborator***

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## **Introduction**

A continuing challenge for biblical scholars and general gospel readers is determining how and why the Jewish high priest Joseph Caiaphas was involved with the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate in the arrest and execution of Jesus of Nazareth. Over the past fifty years, the word “collaborator” has been used by many scholars as a convenient tool for discerning the relationship between the two men and as the key to unlocking the mystery of the involvement of Caiaphas in this incident. Many have argued that Caiaphas collaborated with Rome—in the person of Pontius Pilate—against the interests of his own Jewish people and in pursuit of his personal agenda. Despite minuscule evidence supporting the label, “collaborator” has been used as a condensed explanation for the motivations, intentions, and actions of Caiaphas in relation to the arrest and execution of Jesus of Nazareth.

This paper seeks to demonstrate that the identification of Caiaphas as a Roman collaborator in the arrest and execution of Jesus of Nazareth is inappropriate, inadequate, inaccurate, and ultimately damaging to relations between Jews and Christians. The word is an intrusion from outside the biblical tradition; it is inadequate and misleading in scholarly efforts to pinpoint the role of Caiaphas; it does not fit the slender evidence concerning the relationship between these two men; it is so insufficiently precise in meaning as to be meaningless in this context; and its use requires modern commentators to see into the heart and mind of a man whose actual name is barely known to us.

## **High Priest Joseph Caiaphas as a Remembered Collaborator**

English-speaking scholars over the past fifty years have consistently presented Joseph Caiaphas as a collaborator with Roman authorities, principally Pontius Pilate. The following representative examples provide a sense of the spirit of scholarly opinion on this issue. Eugene Fisher notes that Caiaphas is “remembered

in Jewish history negatively as a collaborator with Rome.”<sup>1</sup> Craig Evans identifies “Pilate’s Jewish collaborators—Caiaphas and his priestly associates.”<sup>2</sup> Barbara Reid locates Caiaphas in Luke’s account of “the ubiquitous presence of Roman emperors, governors, tetrarchs, proconsuls, tribunes, and soldiers, along with the collaborating high priests.”<sup>3</sup> James Watts observes how early Christian authors set the foundations for the identification of Caiaphas as a Roman collaborator: “in the historical narratives of traditional Judaism and Christianity, the Aaronide dynasties appear as greedy and traitorous collaborators with foreign empires (e.g., John 11:50).”<sup>4</sup> Richard Horsley sums up the accepted scholarly consensus in this way: “Many if not most Jewish historians and Biblical scholars were working with the assumptions that the Jewish high priests of the early Roman period were aristocratic collaborators with the Roman rule of Palestine.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite Horsley’s generalization, none of these examples should be taken to mean that everyone considered Caiaphas to have been a Roman collaborator. This description has been pervasive and influential—but not universal—in discussions about his role in the arrest and execution of Jesus. As Gerard Sloyan summarizes, there are those “who think the Roman-Sadducean collaboration was likely, and others who are convinced that any account whatever of Jewish cooperation with the empire must have been fabricated.”<sup>6</sup> The Anglophone scholarly use of the term “collaborator” for Caiaphas is thus not universal, but it is widespread. A general gospel reader easily could be persuaded that this description is the most apt way to characterize Caiaphas. It is not.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Fisher, “The Bible, the Jews and the Passion,” *America* 190 (2004): 5, 8.

<sup>2</sup> Craig Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 173.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Reid, “Women Prophets of God’s Alternative Reign,” in *Luke-Acts and Empire: Essays in Honor of Robert L. Hawley*, ed. David Rhoads, David Esterline, and Jae Won Lee (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 47.

<sup>4</sup> James Watts, “Scripturalization and the Aaronide Dynasties,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 13 (2017): 1. John 11:50 recounts Caiaphas claiming: “You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” See also Scott Barchy, “Where is the History in Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*?” *Pastoral Psychology* 53 (2005): 6, 325; Sarah Fairbanks, “Review”: Marilyn Salmon, *Preaching Without Contempt: Overcoming Unintended Anti-Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), in *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 479.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Horsley, “High Priest and the Politics of Roman Palestine: A Contextual Analysis of the Evidence in Josephus,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 17 (1986): 23. Other scholars have echoed these sentiments: John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1994), 136; Mary Boys, *Redeeming our Sacred Story: The Death of Jesus and Relations between Jews and Christians* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2013), 173; Warren Carter, *Pontius Pilate: Portraits of a Roman Governor* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003), 48; Helen Bond, *Caiaphas: Friend of Rome and Judge of Jesus?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 12.

<sup>6</sup> Gerard Sloyan, *Jesus on Trial: A Study of the Gospels*, second edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 3.

### The Caiaphas of History

Historical records have bequeathed the barest details about the life and career of Joseph Caiaphas. He was likely born sometime around 20 BCE, although the exact circumstances and time of his birth are unknown. He was the Jewish high priest from 18 CE to early 37. According to Josephus, he was appointed to the position by Valerius Gratus, the Roman prefect who preceded Pontius Pilate (*Antiquities*, 18.2.2) and who exercised direct responsibility then for the administration of Judea. He was the longest serving high priest in the first century CE; his contemporaries averaged around four years in the job.<sup>7</sup> The position was often a precarious one; Roman officials routinely deposed Jewish high priests. Caiaphas himself was deposed as high priest shortly after Pontius Pilate was recalled to Rome in 36 CE. Caiaphas had married the daughter (whose name is unknown to us<sup>8</sup>) of Ananus I, who was high priest from 6 CE to 15 CE. This Ananus, known to Christians as Annas from his brief appearances in the gospels,<sup>9</sup> was the progenitor of a dynasty of high priests between 6 CE and 65 CE that included his five sons, one son-in-law (Caiaphas), and one grandson. While we cannot know the full circumstances of his appointment, we can plausibly imagine that Caiaphas' ascent to the high priesthood was due to "this marriage, rather than the power and prestige of his family."<sup>10</sup>

The New Testament refers to him only as Caiaphas—his family name. We learn from Josephus that his full name is Joseph ben Caiaphas. Josephus relates how the Roman legate in Syria, Vitellius, having sent the Roman governor Pontius Pilate back to Rome in 36 CE to explain an incident involving rough treatment of Samaritans, returned the high priestly vestments to Jewish custody which had previously been under the control of Roman officials. Josephus continues to observe how after Vitellius "had bestowed these benefits upon the nation, he removed from his office the high priest Joseph, who is also called Caiaphas, and appointed in his stead Jonathan, son of Ananus the high priest" (*Antiquities*, 18.4.3). However, Josephus does not provide his readers with commentary on the personality, background or administrative conduct of Caiaphas, so little can be deduced from these writings about his personal attributes, political motivations, family background or leadership style—or why Vitellius deposed him.<sup>11</sup> Also, the exact date when Caiaphas was deposed is unclear, though many believe it was late in 36 or

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<sup>7</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?: Exploring the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995), 148.

<sup>8</sup> See John 18:13, "They took him to Annas who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas."

<sup>9</sup> See Luke 3:2: "...during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas."

<sup>10</sup> Richard Bauckham, "The Caiaphas Family," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 10 (2012): 29.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Chilton, "Caiaphas," in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1: 805: "No judgment of Caiaphas' character can make any serious claim on our attention, except as an imaginative exercise. Historically speaking, the available evidence will not permit conclusions of that sort."

early 37.<sup>12</sup> What happened to Caiaphas subsequently is unknown. He may have returned to priestly duties in the Temple; he may have died soon after. Helen Bond says that “we will never, of course, know. Caiaphas’ death, like his birth, remains shrouded in mystery.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Collaborator: A Brief History and Geography of the Word**

The first hurdle in using the word “collaborator” to describe Caiaphas is establishing its meaning. Dictionaries provide two clashing definitions. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term collaborator is derived from the Latin prefix *col* (an assimilated form of *com*)—with, together, and the root *laborare*—to work. From the early decades of the nineteenth century, the term indicated “one who works in conjunction with another or others; *esp.* in literary, artistic, or scientific work.” This, with its positive connotation, is the common way the word is employed today. However, the OED documents the emergence of a second meaning. It shows how the word experienced a semantic shift from the early 1940s in response to experiences during World War II, gaining a negative connotation. This second definition reads: “One who collaborates with the enemy.”<sup>14</sup> The widespread cooperation of citizens with enemy occupiers in regions conquered by Nazis pushed the meaning of the word in English to denote activities of national betrayal, conspiracy and treachery which previously had not been associated with the word collaborator.<sup>15</sup>

The standout example of treasonous collaboration associated with World War II is Vidkun Quisling, whose “name entered the English dictionary as a term defining a person who betrayed his country through collaboration with an occupying enemy.”<sup>16</sup> Understanding and appreciating the meaning of collaborator as applied to Quisling enlightens the modern association of Caiaphas with the idea of collaboration, so a brief survey is beneficial. On April 9, 1940, the Norwegian citizen Quisling installed himself as Minister President of the national government in Nazi German-occupied Norway. Quisling did not regard himself as a collaborator, but as a patriot. At his trial on charges of treason in September 1945, he maintained “the legal system had misconstrued his motives and misunderstood his mission.”<sup>17</sup> He told his accusers that his functioning as Minister President had been in the best

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<sup>12</sup> James VanderKam, *Joshua to Caiaphas: High Priests after the Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 432-4.

<sup>13</sup> Bond, *Caiaphas*, 89.

<sup>14</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, available at: <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/36198?redirectedFrom=collaborator#eid>. Accessed 27 September 2022.

<sup>15</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*. “Collaborate: to co-operate traitorously with the enemy.” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/36195?redirectedFrom=collaborate#eid>. Accessed 27 September 2022.

<sup>16</sup> “Collaboration,” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Accessed 27 September 2022). Available at: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/collaboration>.

<sup>17</sup> Hans Dahl, *Quisling: A Study in Treachery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1.

interests of the nation. Though found guilty and executed by firing squad on October 24, 1945, he exuded an attitude right to the end that communicated “a sense of another, higher kind of innocence.”<sup>18</sup> In his trial, he made “several references to a new kingdom of god on earth as the driving force behind his actions.”<sup>19</sup>

Norwegian post-war investigations by medical, legal, academic, and political agencies into Vidkun Quisling as a Nazi collaborator are revealing. First, Quisling did not think he was guilty of treason. On the contrary, he believed he was saving his people and setting the foundations for a flourishing national future. His vision was for national resurrection, decidedly Nordic, purposely undemocratic, purged of wasteful competition between political opponents and purified of decadent influences.<sup>20</sup> He did not foresee or desire a permanent German presence in his country. His interaction with the Nazi occupiers was a useful means to achieve his desired ends.<sup>21</sup> Second, professional judgments about his status as a collaborator were conditioned by the social and political climate of the immediate post-war period when the attribution was made.<sup>22</sup> Norwegian political leaders, lawyers and psychiatrists at that time were “caught up in the emotion and controversy of the Quisling trial and the treatment of collaborators. Later, there was tacit agreement that their stand had been less than objective, sharing the public repulsion towards collaborators.”<sup>23</sup> Third, post-war Norwegian investigators “divided acts of collaboration into ten different categories (of apparent decreasing seriousness),”<sup>24</sup> which included participation in the central administration, membership of the Norwegian

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<sup>18</sup> Dahl, *Quisling*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Kaplan, “Norwegian Psychiatry and the Trial of Vidkun Quisling,” *Nordic Journal of Psychiatry* 66 (2012): 155-8.

<sup>20</sup> Fredrik Wilhelmsen, “‘National Decay and National Resurrection’: The Semiotics of Quisling’s Conception of History,” in *War and Semiotics: Signs, Communication Systems, and the Preparation, Legitimization, and Commemoration of Collective Mass Violence*, ed. Frank Jacobs (New York: Routledge, 2020), 229-258.

<sup>21</sup> Quisling identified Jews as a contaminating influence in Norway because of his idiosyncratic perception of their connection with both capitalism and international communism. He acquiesced with the Nazis’ forced removal of them from Norway. See Oddvar Hoidal, “Vidkun Quisling and the Deportation of Norway’s Jews,” *Scandinavian Studies* 88 (2016): 270-294. Quisling also moved to limit resistance from the church by declaring himself supreme bishop of the Norwegian Church. See Torleiv Austad, “Church Resistance Against Nazism in Norway, 1940-1945,” *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 28 (2015): 278-293.

<sup>22</sup> Oyvind Giaever, “The Psychiatry of Quislingism: Norwegian Psychiatric Research on the Collaborators of World War II,” *Science in Context*, 17 (2004): 267-292 reviews studies of investigators given the task of assessing the mind and motivations of Norwegian collaborators. Giaever considers that the determinations of researchers were shallow “due to a general lack of adequate methodology in the contemporaneous sciences.” He considers the “explanation must be sought in the project’s social and historical context” (267). Giaever explains that the researchers found the collaborators were no more or less insane than the average Norwegian. However: “The Norwegian psychiatrists seemed strangely reluctant to finish the project, and it is reasonable to see this in relation to the public and political currents of the immediate postwar period. Whereas the insanity hypothesis was welcome in the Norwegian public at the time, its definite rejection was perhaps not” (289). This is to say, the mind of the people was made up; scientific evidence was rendered redundant. Medical experts fell into line and followed the popular view.

<sup>23</sup> Kaplan, “Norwegian Psychiatry,” 155.

<sup>24</sup> Giaever, “The Psychiatry of Quislingism,” 268.

version of the Nazi party, informers, propagandists, (German) military volunteers, and fraternizers—usually, but not always, women whose relationships were frowned upon but not considered illegal or treasonous.<sup>25</sup> Robert Kaplan observes how many in the immediate post-WWII era preferred a binary rather than a nuanced set of criteria: “it suited the government, the public and those individuals whose conscience was not entirely clear to adopt this categorical view, rather than take the more objective position that there were many grades of collaboration, both active and passive.”<sup>26</sup>

In Norway, and beyond, the understandings of the contexts of interaction between enemies and the applicability of “collaborator” to these contexts evolved as the decades progressed. This is highly visible in the attitudes taken to Jewish detainees who ostensibly cooperated with the Nazis, serving administrative functions in the camps and ghettos.<sup>27</sup> In the immediate post-war period, as Dan Porat’s research of Israeli court trials demonstrates, “many believed that those who served in leadership positions in ghettos and camps, shared responsibility with the Germans for the catastrophe that had befallen them.”<sup>28</sup> Essentially, the *kapos* were presumed guilty until proven innocent. But this understanding began to change. Israel’s Attorney-General Haim Cohn doubted a court’s ability to adjudicate on motives and intentions of collaborators, stating in 1958 that “this is a matter between them and Heaven.”<sup>29</sup> By the 1960s, while still acknowledging the actions of the accused, the dominant view became that “the functionaries had taken up their positions not with the aim of promoting the goals of their persecutors but in the hope of saving themselves and their families.”<sup>30</sup> These ostensible collaborators had indeed done wrong—but with good intentions. Now, true collaborators were identified as “individuals with motivations equal to those of the perpetrator.”<sup>31</sup> This redefinition excluded the *kapos* and cast doubt on the extent of others’ collaboration because,

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<sup>25</sup> Raffael Scheck, *Love Between Enemies: Western Prisoners of War and German Women in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), surveys the extensive documentation of romantic relationships between Allied POWs and German women. These collaborations were officially discouraged, mostly assessed as threats to morale on the battlefields, but not considered treasonous. He writes, “The POWs have simultaneously been accused of collaboration for loving enemy women and praised as resisters for seducing them” (5).

<sup>26</sup> Kaplan, “Norwegian Psychiatry,” 158.

<sup>27</sup> *Kapos* were “Jewish detainees who helped run the Nazi concentration and labor camps, served as ghetto police, and emerged as community leaders. The Nazis compelled many of these individuals into administrative functions while others—believing in negotiation and compromise as tools of social navigation necessary for them and others simply to stay alive—came forward and enlisted.” See Mark Drumbl, “Histories of the Jewish ‘Collaborator’: Exile, Not Guilt,” *Washington & Lee Legal Studies Paper No. 2017-13* (July 28, 2017), Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3009231>.

<sup>28</sup> Dan Porat, *Bitter Reckoning: Israel Tries Holocaust Survivors as Nazi Collaborators* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 2.

<sup>29</sup> Porat, *Bitter Reckoning*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Porat, *Bitter Reckoning*, 6-7. One charged collaborator “believed that sustaining a good relationship with the Nazis would enable him to save Jews in the future” (5).

<sup>31</sup> Dan Porat, “Changing Perceptions of ‘Nazi Collaborators’ in Israel 1950-1972,” in *Jewish Honor Courts: Revenge, Retribution, and Reconciliation in Europe and Israel after the Holocaust*, ed. Laura Jockusch and Gabriel Finder (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015), 320.

among other considerations, it required investigators to undertake the difficult, if not impossible, task of determining individual intentions.

This transformation also appears in the writings of Primo Levi, an Italian chemist and survivor of Auschwitz who first published his memoir *If This is a Man* in 1958.<sup>32</sup> In a chapter titled “The Drowned and the Saved,”<sup>33</sup> Levi explored what scholar Lawrence Langer would later term the “choiceless choices” that confronted those coerced by Nazis into service of the Reich.<sup>34</sup> Primo Levi introduced the Nazi camp as a morally ambiguous realm, a “gray zone,”<sup>35</sup> indecipherable to newcomers since it did not conform to any known model. In that context, it is difficult to judge the motivation of fellow Jews who cooperated with the Nazis.<sup>36</sup> He said that some may have been “only apparently collaborators, camouflaged opponents.”<sup>37</sup> And even those “gray, ambiguous persons, ready to compromise” cannot be adequately judged without recognizing that “the prisoners’ errors and weaknesses are not enough to rank them with their custodians.”<sup>38</sup> He argued that “the room for choices was reduced to zero.”<sup>39</sup>

These reflections on developments during and after the Second World War provide context and a basis for critique of the attribution of the term “collaborator” to Joseph Caiaphas. The term is rubbery, malleable, shifting. The English word is a nineteenth century construction with a generally positive connotation that experienced a semantic shift in the 1940s in response to the experiences of World War II. At that time, it also became a synonym for betrayal, conspiracy, and treachery. The meaning of the term evolved with the passage of the years after 1945. The meaning of the term became more nuanced. By the 1980s, collaboration was understood to admit of degrees of involvement, not all of them considered treasonous or traitorous. The sense of an absolute binary distinction broke down and was replaced by a recognition of ambiguity and complexity<sup>40</sup> that suggested caution in making judgments about assigning personal guilt and responsibility for actions and

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<sup>32</sup> Primo Levi, *If This is a Man* (London: Penguin, 1979), was first published in Italian in 1958 under the title, *Se Questo e un Uomo*.

<sup>33</sup> Subsequently expanded to a book in English of the same title thirty years later, (New York: Summit Books, 1988).

<sup>34</sup> Some have challenged Langer’s notion of “choiceless choices” by analyzing the range of responses from Jewish individuals and communities whose actions and choices were conditioned by a complex range of community factors. See Evgeny Finkel, *Ordinary Jews: Choice and Survival During the Holocaust* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). Such scholarly debates underline the complexity and ongoing disputes around making judgments about the actions and attitudes of those who complied with Nazi policies.

<sup>35</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 25-56.

<sup>36</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 44.

<sup>37</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 46.

<sup>38</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 49.

<sup>39</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 50.

<sup>40</sup> Mark Drumbl, “Histories of the Jewish ‘Collaborator’,” 18, asserts that the term “collaborator” conveys “finality, disjuncture, and category: guilty or not-guilty, persecuted or persecutor, abused or abuser, right or wrong, powerful or powerless. Criminal law hinges upon these binaries.” Drumbl argues these binaries are contrivances that require judges to squeeze accused collaborators “into predetermined absolutes of villain or victim...and are left with no choice other than to differ about the category into which to shoehorn the collaborator.”

decisions. “Collaborator” had been a term formed in the mind of accusers seeking to apportion blame, mostly free of “objective” evidence, which revealed the fraught social-political climate in which the description was applied. With this history of the term in mind, we can return to the example of Joseph Caiaphas to re-assess scholarly judgments about his identification as a “collaborator” with the Roman enemies.

### **Pilate and Caiaphas: Establishing the Evidence of Their Relationship**

Caiaphas has commonly been portrayed in art and cinema “as a corpulent, even grotesque old man with a straggly beard, hook nose, blotchy complexion, and a sly, even devilish grin, wearing robes and an elaborate head covering with hornlike protrusions.”<sup>41</sup> European medieval and renaissance artists painted a plump, self-satisfied, worldly figure who sat in judgment on the fate of Jesus. For examples of such images, see Albrecht Durer, c. 1508, *Christ before Caiaphas*, and Giotto, c. 1304, *Christ before Caiaphas*.<sup>42</sup> Movie makers in the silent era and in the early talkies generally portrayed “Caiaphas as the prime example of the money-grubbing Jew for whom the pursuit of profit overrides all other considerations.”<sup>43</sup> These are consistent with Caiaphas’ literary portrayal through the centuries. In the hands of the Church Fathers, Caiaphas became emblematic of all those who opposed Jesus in particular and Christians in general. They denigrated Caiaphas for his hostility towards Jesus and tagged him as the mastermind of the plot against him. Tertullian (c. 155-c. 220) preached, “On the Resurrection of the Flesh” where he used the words of Psalm 2 in identifying Annas and Caiaphas as “the rulers” who “were gathered together against the Lord, and against His anointed.”<sup>44</sup> Athanasius (c. 293-373), in “On the Opinion of Dionysius” said that all opponents of Christians “emulate this characteristic of Caiaphas and his party, just as they have learned from them to deny Christ.”<sup>45</sup> Augustine (354-430) in “Reply to Faustus the Manichean” resolved the dilemma posed by John 11:49-52 of how Caiaphas was able to predict Jesus’ future in the manner of a prophet inspired by God: “even Caiaphas, wicked as he was, was able to prophesy without knowing it.”<sup>46</sup> Medieval mystery plays presented him almost as a cartoon character. In European Passion Plays in the Middle Ages, Caiaphas took his place among the assembly as “the Christ killing Jew

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<sup>41</sup> Adele Reinhartz, *Caiaphas: The High Priest* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 202.

<sup>42</sup> Albrecht Durer (1471-1528), *Christ Before Caiaphas*, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collectio/search/388049>; Giotto (1266-1337) *Christ Before Caiaphas*, <https://www.wikiart.org/en/giotto/christ-before-caiaphas>.

<sup>43</sup> Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 216.

<sup>44</sup> Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 3: 559.

<sup>45</sup> Philip Schaff, *A Select Library of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 4: 177.

<sup>46</sup> Schaff, *Select Library*, 4: 228.



who proved a most appropriate villain.”<sup>47</sup> Note that none of these portray Caiaphas as collaborating with Pilate!

Since little evidence of any kind is available detailing the relationship between Joseph Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate, scholars rely heavily on overlap in the dates for Pilate and Caiaphas to support their views about the actions and motivations of Caiaphas, using inference and implication to bridge the gaps. We see this in the conclusions drawn from Caiaphas’ unusually long term as high priest. Scott Bartchy writes that Caiaphas

had learned well how to get along with the Roman occupation forces. Indeed, he apparently had made himself seem indispensable. For when the Roman authorities were appointing new Jewish high priests on the average of every 16 months (17 high priests in 22 years), they retained Caiaphas in power for 18 years.<sup>48</sup>

Mary Boys similarly affirms the putative collaborative role played by Caiaphas, writing that “since Caiaphas was high priest for the entirety of Pilate’s rule, we may infer that together high priest and prefect formed a powerful alliance.”<sup>49</sup> John Dominic Crossan earlier had gone even further, writing,

It is equally significant that both Caiaphas and Pilate were themselves dismissed around the same time in late 36 and early 37 C.E.... It is not unfairly cynical to presume that there was close cooperation between Caiaphas and Pilate, that it often offended Jewish sensibilities, and that eventually it became necessary to break up that cooperation in Rome’s best interests.<sup>50</sup>

These are just a few examples of the many prepared to view this confluence of two men sharing time and space as proof that they engaged in a collaborative relationship to their mutual benefit and to the detriment of the Jewish people and nation.

But this piece of temporal evidence can be read in several ways. Although their appointments overlapped: Caiaphas from 18-36 CE and Pilate from c. 26-37 CE,<sup>51</sup> presuming collaboration ignores the reality of the massive imbalance of power that existed between the two men. As Eugene Fisher notes, “data from the Gospels and ancient secular sources such as Philo and Josephus portray Pilate as a ruthless tyrant. The Roman governor held absolute power over the chief priest, whom he appointed.”<sup>52</sup> Any description of the relationship between Caiaphas and Roman

<sup>47</sup> Jeremy Cohen, *Christ Killers: The Jews and the Passion from the Bible to the Big Screen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 214.

<sup>48</sup> Scott Bartchy, “Where is the History?,” 322.

<sup>49</sup> Mary Boys, *Redeeming our Sacred Story*, 171.

<sup>50</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?: Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995), 149.

<sup>51</sup> Craig Evans, “Excavating Caiaphas, Pilate, and Simon of Cyrene: Assessing the Literary and Archaeological Evidence,” in *Jesus and Archaeology*, ed. James Charlesworth (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 2006), 337.

<sup>52</sup> Fisher, “The Bible, the Jews, and the Passion,” 8.

authorities must take this into account. Pilate could have deposed Caiaphas on a moment's notice with no recourse. Roman occupation was based on delegation to local aristocrats who were expected to maintain order.<sup>53</sup> It was likely, then, in the interests of Pontius Pilate—that local and ruthless aristocrat—to maintain Joseph Caiaphas in his role of high priest: Pilate had his man where he needed him.

However we might assess the slender evidence, Caiaphas was successful in navigating the challenges of working under a murderous and corrupt Roman prefect who represented the interests of an invading foreign power that threatened national survival.<sup>54</sup> While Pontius Pilate was known for clashes with groups and individuals over whom he ruled, none of these clashes, on the available evidence, appears to have included Caiaphas. Pilate did not appoint or depose any high priest during his lengthy tenure as prefect. Scholars have offered a range of guesses to account for this fact. Maybe Annas, the family patriarch, offered Pilate bribes to keep Caiaphas in office until his own son was ready for the high priesthood.<sup>55</sup> Or, perhaps Caiaphas himself offered Pilate financial incentives to maintain his tenure.<sup>56</sup> Maybe his Roman bosses discouraged Pilate from deposing Jewish officials to avoid antagonizing the locals.<sup>57</sup> Or, maybe Caiaphas was simply good at the role he was given and it proved to be in no one's interest to remove him from it.<sup>58</sup> However, confidence in determining Caiaphas' historical relationship with Pilate is undermined by lack of evidence. We have no reliable ancient testimony that the two men ever met. No text explicitly locates Caiaphas at Pilate's interrogation of Jesus. Nor is Caiaphas present at Jesus' crucifixion in any canonical gospel. The contemporary Jewish historian Flavius Josephus tells us little. He does not mention Caiaphas when describing two major crises involving Pilate and the Temple: his placement of busts there (*Antiquities* 18.3.1) and his raiding Temple funds to construct an aqueduct (*Antiquities* 18.3.2). This suggests that Caiaphas did nothing "that attracted the attention of Josephus's sources from the time of his appointment until the end of his reign."<sup>59</sup> This does not mean that the two men had no interactions. The search for the historical Caiaphas is plagued by the same constraint as for other gospel characters: the available sources must be recognized as partial and fragmentary.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Paula Fredriksen, *When Christians were Jews: The First Generation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 71.

<sup>54</sup> Caiaphas like the other high priests of the era "were philo-Roman only in the sense that they recognized the power of Rome and the consequent futility of opposing it....In their hearts they probably had little genuine love for Roman dominance as such." E. Mary Smallwood, "High Priests and Politics in Roman Palestine," *Journal of Theological Studies* 13 (1962): 28.

<sup>55</sup> Helen Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 19.

<sup>56</sup> David Catchpole, *The Trial of Jesus: A Study in the Gospels and Jewish Historiography from 1770 to the Present Day* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 249.

<sup>57</sup> Daniel Schwartz, *Studies in the Jewish Background of Christianity* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1992), 198.

<sup>58</sup> E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993), 27.

<sup>59</sup> VanderKam, *Joshua to Caiaphas*, 431. VanderKam thinks this silence by Josephus is "intriguing."

<sup>60</sup> Adele Reinhartz, "Crucifying Caiaphas: Hellenism and the High Priesthood in Life of Jesus Narratives," in *Defining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities*, ed. Fabian Udoh with Susannah

We cannot be sure if the negative portrayal of Caiaphas originated with Christians, but their received perceptions amplified any pre-existing antipathy. Early Christians built on popular resentments towards Jewish religion, casting key characters in negative light. As James Watts summarizes:

They supplanted Aaronide priests with the priestly office of Christ and his successors (Heb 4:14-10:18). They reproduced and sharpened Jewish criticisms of Second Temple-era high priests and cast them as the chief plotters against Jesus' life (Mark 14:1-2 and parallels) .... At best, they are depicted as subservient students of rabbinic lore and at worst as tyrannical persecutors of the righteous.<sup>61</sup>

Accumulated Christian hostility towards Caiaphas may have been the reason gospel authors tended to omit Caiaphas' name from their narrative accounts of Jesus' Passion.<sup>62</sup> The execution of James, brother of Jesus of Nazareth and leader of the Jerusalem church, by Ananus II in 62 is an indication of a continuing pattern of conflict between Christians and the priestly establishment, which may help to explain the gospel authors' aversion to Caiaphas.<sup>63</sup> Traces of this resentment may also be detected in Acts 4 which recounts the experience of Peter and John before the Council in Jerusalem who were "much annoyed" (Acts 4:2) with their preaching and teaching about the resurrection of the dead. All of this points to our need to discount the historicity of the New Testament accounts about Caiaphas in assessing his and the Jerusalem priesthood's relationship with Rome.

Thus, conjectures about the relationship between Caiaphas and Pilate bear witness more to the fertility of scholarly imagination rather than to the foundations of verifiable evidence. Any or all of these explanations may be accurate, but they remain no more than plausible guesses in the absence of compelling evidence. Their variety and tentativeness testify to the reality that available evidence does not allow a definitive answer to the question of the complicity of Caiaphas in the governance of Roman Palestine by Pontius Pilate. And, if the sum or any parts of these guesses indicate collaboration, then they signify by their diversity that such collaboration is difficult, if not impossible, to categorize or describe in accurate detail.

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Heschel, Mark Chancey, and Gregory Tatum (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2008), 242. Sloyan, *Jesus on Trial*, 107, notes that no post-resurrection Jesus followers had access to the records of the decision making of either the Temple or the Romans.

<sup>61</sup> Watts, "Scripturalization and the Aaronide Dynasties," 2.

<sup>62</sup> Jesus appears before the "high priest" in Mark 14:53-65. Luke 22:66-70 omits the mention of Caiaphas by name or title in the scene narrating Jesus before the council. Matthew 26:57 names Caiaphas as the high priest but identifies him by title rather than name subsequently in 26:58-68. John 18:24 recounts Jesus taken to "Caiaphas the high priest" but provides no details of any interaction between them.

<sup>63</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 187.

### Locating Joseph Caiaphas in the Story of Christianity

Christian reflection on the relationship between Pontius Pilate and the high priest Joseph Caiaphas is fundamental to Christian self-understanding. Without Caiaphas' role in the story of Jesus, Christianity would not exist in the way it does.

"Collaborator" is not an accurate descriptor of the Jewish high priest Joseph Caiaphas' dealings with the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate. It became routinely attached to Caiaphas by English-speaking scholars, but not when the word first became available in English in the nineteenth century, when the term was coined to describe separate parties who cooperated to achieve mutually agreed goals. "Collaborator" was commonly associated with Joseph Caiaphas only after the word became freighted with images of treachery, corruption, and betrayal in the years during and after World War II. It became as much a character slur as an attempt to explain the motivations, intentions, and actions of a leader attempting to navigate the political realities for his people subjected to the vicissitudes of a conquering master nation.<sup>64</sup> In defiance of the evidence, this usage forces inescapable binaries in describing Caiaphas' character, condemning him for what is only his putative involvement in the execution of Jesus. If his actions were not good, then they must have been bad, with no nuance derived from the complex context in which he operated under Roman oppression.<sup>65</sup>

Other interpretations are available to us. Stephen Mason offers a realist's analysis of relations between Rome and Jerusalem. He explains that "realism lowers our gaze from loftier conceptions of freedom to the concrete struggle for survival, as each nation looks constantly to secure itself against immediate threats."<sup>66</sup> For realist theorists, "the struggle for (or use of) power among states is at the core of international relations."<sup>67</sup> Mason uses these categories to argue that "weaker nations form productive security alliances whenever possible, and trust great powers when they must. Some of their leaders will counsel fidelity to the great power even in extreme danger, because of the greater risk of disloyalty."<sup>68</sup> This analysis allows

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<sup>64</sup> Geza Vermes, *Searching for the Real Jesus: Jesus, the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Religious Themes* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 100; Caiaphas "found himself in an unenviable position. As the head of the Jews in Judea, he and his council were duty-bound to keep law and order for the Romans in a troublesome country and even more turbulent Jerusalem....The governors were the absolute masters of the Jewish high priests whom they appointed and sacked at will."

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 299: "I do not doubt that Jesus was arrested on the orders of the high priest and interrogated. But we cannot know much more. It seems quite clear that they [the evangelists] did not know why Jesus was executed from the point of view of the Jewish leaders." See also: Sanders, *Historical Figure*, 273, who indicates the complexity in his judgment that Caiaphas acted "not because of theological disagreement, but because of his principal political and moral responsibility: to preserve the peace and to prevent riots and bloodshed." Vermes, *Searching for Jesus*, 102, offers another perspective: "The decision of Caiaphas to hand Jesus over to Pontius Pilate did not reflect his legal incapacity to do so. He was passing the buck."

<sup>66</sup> Stephen Mason, "What Have the Romans Ever Done for Us?" *Brian and Josephus on Anti-Roman Sentiment*, in *Exploring the Historical Jesus and His Times via Monty Python's Life of Brian*, ed. Joan Taylor (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 205.

<sup>67</sup> Paul Viotti and Mark Kauppi, *International Relations Theory* (New York: Longman, 2019), 43.

<sup>68</sup> Mason, "What Have the Romans Ever Done for Us?" 205.

us to perceive Caiaphas as a success in achieving national security from a position of personal and national vulnerability.<sup>69</sup> The Fourth Gospel author reflects this circumstance when he recounts an intervention at the council about Jesus at which Caiaphas was present, writing, “If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy our holy place and our nation” (John 11:48). As Jae Won Lee observes, “Caiaphas’s discussion with the council in John 11:48 reflects resistance to Rome in his desire to maintain some autonomy of the ‘people’ at the same time that he wishes to ward off any action of Rome to destroy the temple and the nation.”<sup>70</sup>

The image of Caiaphas as a wily politician affords the opportunity to view him as the type of skilled leader able to operate under crushing demands from a ruthless invading regime. This is still far from a flattering portrait of the character of Joseph Caiaphas. The preceding discussion has neither attempted to paint Caiaphas in sepia tones as in possession of a kind heart and generous disposition, nor attempted to elevate or justify whatever actions he may have taken. Nonetheless, this image of a wily, pragmatic politician “bears some relationship to the primary sources,” as Adele Reinhartz points out, “and it avoids the faint whiff of supersessionism that lingers in the air after Jesus the truest Jew has done battle with Caiaphas the corrupt hellenizer.”<sup>71</sup> While we might not be justified in characterizing his actions as a “choiceless choice,” we could legitimately view Caiaphas’ situation as a Hobson’s Choice—an illusion of choice, a choice between undesirable options, a quest for the least bad path.

The mis-cast image of Caiaphas the Roman collaborator has served to damage relations between Christians and Jews. The assigned moral culpability of Caiaphas for the death of Jesus is closely correlated with the way Christians have imagined the complicity of (all/many/some/only a few) Jews in Jesus’ demise; Caiaphas has been used as a surrogate who can represent all Jews who opposed Jesus. In many—if not most—popular presentations of the life story of Jesus in all genres (movies, literature, visual arts, drama), “Caiaphas is the calculating political leader who orchestrates the arrest, trial, and death sentence of Jesus. He thus bears ultimate responsibility for the crucifixion.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> We can hear echoes of Norwegian Vidkun Quisling’s self-justification in this analysis. We might also align Caiaphas with most Jewish “collaborators” under the Nazi regime who “did not act for their own benefit but rather operated under the assumption that by cooperating to a degree, they could mitigate Nazi oppression, retain a measure of Jewish autonomy and agency, or enhance chances for the survival of their fellow Jews.” Laura Jockusch and Gabriel Finder, “Introduction: Revenge, Retribution, and Reconciliation in the Postwar Jewish World,” in *Jewish Honor Courts*, 6.

<sup>70</sup> Jae Won Lee, “Pilate and the Crucifixion of Jesus in Luke-Acts,” in *Luke-Acts and Empire*, 96. Lee observes the ambiguity and complexity of the situation in which Caiaphas acted: “elite Judeans act in the interest of maintaining their status. But maintaining their status is also the way to maintain a semblance of national autonomy and identity,” 96. VanderKam, *Joshua to Caiaphas*, 427 considers that in John 11:47-53, and repeated in John 18:14, “Caiaphas was making a realistic political point.”

<sup>71</sup> Reinhartz, “Crucifying Caiaphas,” 243.

<sup>72</sup> Reinhartz, “Crucifying Caiaphas,” 227. This theme has been pursued in Passion Plays, the most prominent example of which is the one performed by locals at Oberammergau in Germany. James Shapiro, *Oberammergau: The Troubling Story of the World’s Most Famous Passion Play* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000), x, has acknowledged that all Passion Plays carry the “legacy of medieval anti-

Assigning responsibility for the death of Jesus has been a major stumbling block in relations between Christians and Jews for the past nineteen hundred years. The Jewish milieu in which the gospel Jesus of Nazareth encountered the high priest Joseph Caiaphas is more complex and ambiguous than traditionally has been presented when telling the Christian story. To the best of our historical knowledge, the two men were driven by a “jumble of religious, political, careerist, fearful, ambitious, and other motives.”<sup>73</sup> The term collaborator to describe the interaction of Joseph Caiaphas with Roman power is neither sufficiently nuanced, accurate, nor appropriate for employment in the ambiguous and complicated context in which the Jewish leader found himself. Nor is continued use of the term of any assistance in healing fractures in relations between Christians and Jews.

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Judaism.” Attempts by recent directors at Oberammergau to change course “failed to blunt the criticism or meet the requirements of those demanding change.” Kevin Wetmore, “Introduction: Forty-First in the Twenty-First,” in *The Oberammergau Passion Play: Essays on the 2010 Performance and Centuries-Long Tradition*, ed. Kevin Wetmore (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2017), 7. The Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations acknowledged the 2010 play script “avoids the common pitfall of contrasting a weak and vacillating Pilate with a determined and powerful Caiaphas.” Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations, “Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on 2010 Oberammergau Play Script,” 2010. Available from: <https://ccjr.us/news/newsflash/ccjr2010may14>. However, Caiaphas has now replaced Judas in the revised script as the principal Jewish villain: “Past characterizations of Judas as epitomizing Jewish evil and treachery are refocused onto Caiaphas.” CCJR, “Report,” 5.3.

<sup>73</sup> CCJR, “Report,” 9.