

“YOU KNOW NOTHING AT ALL”:
IRONIC PROPHECY AND REVERSAL OF MEANING IN JOHN 11:45–53

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	4
CHAPTER ONE: CAIAPHAS, IRONIC PROPHET	5
CHAPTER TWO: SIGNS OF TROUBLE	8
A CLOSE READING OF 11:45–53.....	8
SIGNIFICANT ELEMENTS OF THE PERICOPE.....	13
THE HISTORICAL CAIAPHAS.....	17
SOME NOTES ABOUT CAIAPHAS AND THE NATURE OF PROPHECY.....	19
JOHN 11:50 IN THE COMMENTARY TRADITION.....	21
CHAPTER THREE: IRONY, EASIER IN PRACTICE THAN IN THEORY	23
IRONY IN ANTIQUITY AND MODERNITY.....	23
(ABORTED) DEFINITIONS AND CAUTIOUSLY PROPOSED CHARACTERISTICS.....	24
FORM, STRUCTURE, AND INTERPLAY: HOW IRONY WORKS.....	27
STABILITY AND NEGATIVITY.....	29
IRONIC INTENTIONS: WHAT PURPOSE DOES IRONY SERVE?.....	30
DIVINE IRONY.....	32
ANCIENT APPRAISALS OF IRONY.....	34
GREEK TRAGEDY AND DRAMATIC IRONY.....	36
JOHANNINE IRONY.....	40
MAKING SENSE OF IRONY: SOME PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS.....	43
CHAPTER FOUR: ISN'T IT IRONIC?	46
CHECKING THE BOXES: CAIAPHAS' PROPHECY AS IRONIC SPEECH.....	46
WHICH CHARACTERISTICS OF IRONY ARE PRESENT?.....	48
AN IRONIC READING OF 11:45–53.....	53
CONCLUSION: WHY IRONY?.....	59
BIBLIOGRAPHY	62

ABSTRACT

The advice given to the Sanhedrin by Caiaphas in John 11:49–50—namely, that Jesus should be executed for the public good—proves to be ironically prophetic. The saying is ultimately true, but in a manner that runs counter to the high priest's expectations. The Evangelist takes pains to point out that the words are not Caiaphas' own, but rather come by virtue of his office as high priest. Caiaphas misunderstands his own prophecy.

Both ancient and modern conceptions of irony, its forms, and its purposes can help the reader make sense of this puzzling prophecy. Through comparison with Greek tragedy and the work of modern ironologists such as D.C. Muecke, Wayne C. Booth, Glenn S. Holland, and others, it becomes evident that John 11:45–53 fits the generally established characteristics of irony. Moreover, the irony fits the categories of simple, stable, divine, and dramatic ironies.

This passage is particularly important in the Gospel of John, as it serves as a bridge between the Book of Signs and the Book of Glory. In fact, the statement of Caiaphas, when viewed through the Evangelist's interpretive lens, becomes the definitive explanation for Jesus's death in the Fourth Gospel. Therefore, the inclusion of this brief episode in the Gospel narrative imbues the death of Jesus with meaning and highlights an important paradox in the Fourth Gospel—salvation offered through death—as well as the gap between human and divine understanding. The function of this irony, then, is crucial for the interpretation of Jesus's death, for understanding the characterization of Caiaphas, and for grasping the place of the Gospel's audience in the narrative.

“YOU KNOW NOTHING AT ALL”: IRONIC PROPHECY AND REVERSAL OF MEANING IN JOHN 11:45–53

CHAPTER ONE: CAIAPHAS, IRONIC PROPHET

In his landmark 1966 commentary on the Gospel of John, Raymond Brown notes,

“The opponents of Jesus are given to making statements about him that are derogatory, sarcastic, incredulous, or, at least, inadequate in the sense they intend. However, by way of irony these statements are often true or more meaningful in a sense they do not realize.”¹

While this is a recurring motif in the narrative, perhaps the paradigmatic example is the prophecy of Caiaphas.² After calling the Sanhedrin into session to address Jesus’s raising of Lazarus, Caiaphas exclaims, “You know nothing at all! Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man die for the people and whole nation not be destroyed” (11:49–50).³ This meeting will end with the decision to arrest and execute Jesus. The passage marks a turning point in the narrative; from this moment forward, Jesus is acting with an outstanding warrant. It is this episode that marks the shift from the Johannine “Book of Signs” to the “Book of Glory,” transferring the Gospel’s focus from Jesus’s ministry to his impending death. I’ve reproduced the entire pericope (with Greek text) in the chapter following.⁴

¹ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to John I–XII* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), CXXXVI.

² D.A. Carson refers to this as the “apogee” of Johannine irony. D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 421.

³ All translations of ancient texts are my own.

⁴ A *pericope* is a distinct unit of biblical text, usually comprising one complete episode of narrative or a full thread of thought in discourse.

Several authors have treated this passage closely, and most note the irony in the high priest's words, as well as the cold, pragmatic logic of his counsel.⁵ Some see precedents in Jewish legal practice. All note the political situation and the specter of Roman reprisal that haunts the proceeding. Ancient commentators have also discussed this episode, generally focusing on the theological implications of Caiaphas' statement and the subsequent death of Jesus.

However, those who have treated this passage in detail have noted the irony in Caiaphas's words only in passing. It is this gap in scholarship that I wish to fill. If we are to understand the nature of just what makes this passage ironic, then it is necessary to move beyond the approach of many commentators, who do no more than follow the lead of Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart when classifying a passage or event as ironic: "I know it when I see it."⁶ This will require the implementation of a more rigorous methodology for classifying a passage as "ironic" and for characterizing the irony. And if we are to understand the function of the irony—namely, how it serves the Gospel's theological aims—then a more robust and focused examination is required. While I am incapable of providing a universal set of criteria for evaluating irony, this study aims to classify, evaluate, and describe irony as it appears in John 11:45–53.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I offer a close reading of John 11:45–53, noting significant features of the text. I also examine the key role of the episode in the Gospel's narrative and theology. As a part of establishing this context, I also briefly

⁵ See, for example, Werner Grimm, "Die Preisgabe eines Menschen zur Rettung des Volkes: Priesterliche Tradition bei Johannes und Josephus," in *Josephus-Studien: Untersuchungen zu Josephus, dem antiken Judentum und dem Neuen Testament*, ed. Otto Betz, Klaus Haacker, and Martin Hengel (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974), 135–138.

⁶ Justice Stewart expressed this sentiment in his decision in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*. Stewart, of course, was not talking about the definition of irony, but rather pornography.

explore the figure of Caiaphas, the motif of unconscious prophecy in the ancient world, and how the prophecy of 11:50 has been understood in the commentary tradition.

In the third chapter, I survey modern theories of irony. In this survey, I establish the basic features and functions of irony, how it works, and why an author may choose to use it. Following this, I examine irony in ancient contexts, with particular emphasis on the phenomenon of dramatic irony in Greek tragedy. I conclude this survey with a brief history of the study of irony in the Fourth Gospel.

In my fourth and final chapter, I revisit the text, this time incorporating theories of irony into my interpretation of John 11:45–53. This results in a more robust examination of the episode's irony than has been previously performed and enables me to perform another close reading, this time noting the passage's ironic threads. I then end my study by exploring the Evangelist's ironic motivations and some implications for Johannine theology.

As the result of this investigation, I find that the irony of John 11:47–53 fits the basic characteristics typically used to identify irony. Moreover, it includes many important features of ironic texts, such as interplay between an ironist, victim, and observer, clear signals of ironic intentions, a stable subversion of meaning, and corrective force. In its Johannine context, it functions to highlight the gap between human and divine knowledge as well as the paradoxical nature of the salvation offered through the death of Jesus. At the same time, however, it also resolves this tension since one of irony's unique capabilities as a literary device and epistemological mode is that it makes room for paradox by "allow[ing] for contradictory ideas to coexist."⁷ It is a paradox of its own that irony at once creates and resolves contradiction.

⁷ Valeria R. Renegar and Charles E. Goehring, "A/In (Further) Defense of Irony," *JAC* 33.1/2 (2013): 316.

CHAPTER TWO: SIGNS OF TROUBLE

I begin this chapter with a close reading of the passage. In this reading, I draw on the Greek original and the observations of previous scholars. Next, I examine some of the important themes and issues in the pericope—establishing why the episode is a lynchpin of the Johannine narrative and theology. Following this, I have then appended some notations about the historical figure of Joseph ben Caiaphas. Since this study deals mostly with Caiaphas as a literary character in the Fourth Gospel, I only note a few historical points that can shed further light on this characterization. Next, I examine the phenomenon of unconscious prophecy, as understood in both the first century and today. I close the chapter by tracing the interpretation of Caiaphas’ prophecy in 11:50 across the commentary tradition with particular attention to observations about the irony of the scene.

This chapter will establish the relevant facts about the pericope and its interpretation. Much of the extensive scholarship on the passage extends far beyond the scope of this study; for this reason, I will generally bypass questions of historicity, reception, and source criticism, and other subtopics except in a few instances where their conclusions inform the interpretation of the episode. However, despite the abundance of scholarship, few scholars have engaged seriously with theories of irony. Thus, I establish this background preparatory to my survey of ironology in the following chapter. Only by integrating an exegetical reading with this survey will I be able to provide a methodologically sound evaluation of the irony in John 11:45–53.

A Close Reading of 11:45–53

- 45 Πολλοὶ οὖν ἐκ τῶν Ἰουδαίων οἱ ἐλθόντες πρὸς τὴν Μαριάμ καὶ θεασάμενοι ἃ ἐποίησεν ἐπίστευσαν εἰς αὐτόν·
 46 τινὲς δὲ ἐξ αὐτῶν ἀπήλθον πρὸς τοὺς Φαρισαίους καὶ εἶπαν αὐτοῖς ἃ ἐποίησεν Ἰησοῦς.

47 Συνήγαγον οὖν οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι συνέδριον καὶ ἔλεγον· τί ποιῶμεν ὅτι οὗτος ὁ ἄνθρωπος πολλὰ ποιεῖ σημεῖα;
 48 ἐὰν ἀφῶμεν αὐτὸν οὕτως, πάντες πιστεύσουσιν εἰς αὐτόν, καὶ ἐλεύσονται οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι καὶ ἀροῦσιν ἡμῶν καὶ τὸν τόπον καὶ τὸ ἔθνος.
 49 εἷς δέ τις ἐξ αὐτῶν Καϊάφας, ἀρχιερεὺς ὢν τοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ ἐκείνου, εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· ὑμεῖς οὐκ οἴδατε οὐδέν,
 50 οὐδὲ λογίζεσθε ὅτι συμφέρει ὑμῖν ἵνα εἷς ἄνθρωπος ἀποθάνῃ ὑπὲρ τοῦ λαοῦ καὶ μὴ ὅλον τὸ ἔθνος ἀπόληται.
 51 τοῦτο δὲ ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ οὐκ εἶπεν, ἀλλ' ἀρχιερεὺς ὢν τοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ ἐκείνου ἐπροφήτευσεν ὅτι ἔμελλεν Ἰησοῦς ἀποθνήσκειν ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἔθνους,
 52 καὶ οὐχ ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἔθνους μόνον ἀλλ' ἵνα καὶ τὰ τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ τὰ διεσκορπισμένα συναγάγῃ εἰς ἓν.
 53 ἀπ' ἐκείνης οὖν τῆς ἡμέρας ἐβουλεύσαντο ἵνα ἀποκτείνωσιν αὐτόν.

45 And then many of the Jews who had come to Mary and had seen the things that Jesus did believed in him.
 46 But others of them went to the Pharisees and told them the things Jesus had done.
 47 So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the Sanhedrin and said, “What are we doing about the fact that this man is performing many signs?
 48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”
 49 But one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all!
 50 Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man die for the people and whole nation not be destroyed.”
 51 He did not say this of his own volition, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation,
 52 And not only for the nation, but also to gather the scattered children of God into one.
 53 And so from that day on they planned to kill him.
 John 11:45–53

The connection to the previous episode is clear, making the raising of Lazarus the proximate cause for Jesus’s death in the Fourth Gospel. As with Jesus’s previous miracles, the result is controversy. Some of those present believe (v. 45); others are concerned and report the matter to the authorities (v. 46). While the word συνέδριον is used, it’s unclear if this is an official meeting of the body that would later be called the Sanhedrin or a more informal gathering of Jewish leaders.⁸ Regardless of the historical reality of the situation, it seems clear to me that the

⁸ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 348–49.

Evangelist is presenting this debate as taking place at the highest levels of Jewish jurisdiction.

For this reason, in this study I have occasionally referred to this as a meeting of the Sanhedrin.⁹

The pressing fear of the Sanhedrin is that “the Romans will come and take away both [their] place and [their] nation.” Most commentators take “place” (τόπον) as a reference to the temple (the NRSV takes strong, though well-founded interpretive license with “holy place”).¹⁰ The Hebrew מקדש is often used in this sense, and, when combined with the priestly aristocracy’s natural interest and stake in the temple system along with Jesus’s previous activity in the temple (2:13–21) this seems a likely interpretation. This heightens the tragic irony of the scene; the Romans would eventually come in force to “take away [the] holy place and [the] nation” in— from an early Christian perspective—divine retribution for the decision made at this council.

Köstenberger writes,

Again, the irony would be all too apparent to John’s readers (especially after A.D. 70): what the Jewish leadership strenuously sought to avoid, namely, for history to repeat itself and for God’s judgment to fall on Israel’s nation as typefied [*sic*] by the temple, is precisely what ensued in the wake of Jesus’ crucifixion.¹¹

At one point, interpreters assumed that the Evangelist’s reference to Caiaphas being “high priest that year” (ἀρχιερεὺς ὄν τοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ ἐκείνου) betrays a Greco-Roman background and unfamiliarity with Judaism, since many Greek and Roman priests were appointed to annual positions¹² (as opposed to the Jewish high priest’s ostensible lifelong term in office).¹³ However, with increased recognition of the Fourth Evangelist’s careful attention to Jewish customs, this interpretation has lost some of its appeal. In its place, some argue that the emphasis is on the year

⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964), 313 and Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 439, regard this as an official meeting of the Sanhedrin.

¹⁰ D. Moody Smith, Jr., *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: John* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 229; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:855; Köstenberger, *John*, 349–50.

¹¹ Köstenberger, *John*, 350.

¹² Keener, *Gospel of John*, 2:853.

¹³ Bultmann, *Evangelium des Johannes*, 314 n. 2.

rather than the office, it being the “fateful year” of Jesus’s crucifixion.¹⁴ Others see it as a snide condemnation of the priestly class’s collaboration with Rome, a collaboration which brought a newly ephemeral nature to the office of high priest.¹⁵ In a situation in which the Jewish leader could be (and often was) appointed or deposed at the governor’s whim, one may have actually needed a clarification regarding the current officeholder. If this latter interpretation is correct, it would contribute to the satirical and ironic nature of this passage.

Even the pragmatic, surface level reading (which the Evangelist quickly discards), Caiaphas’ counsel “it is better for you that one man die for the people and whole nation not be destroyed” has a basis in Jewish jurisprudence. A precedent may be taken from the case of Sheba in 2 Sam 20:1–22, where one guilty man was sacrificed to save an entire city.¹⁶ This one-for-many issue was also a recurring topic for debate among the rabbis.¹⁷ The high priest may also have in mind the injunctions of Deuteronomy 13, which prescribes immediate death for an Israelite prophet who leads the people into apostasy—even one who performs miraculous signs. Given that Jesus’s ministry was comprised of a series of miracles interspersed with teachings often found offensive by the Jerusalem authorities, they may well view him as a sort of apostate prophet.¹⁸

¹⁴ Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 440; Smith, *John*, 230; Keener, *Gospel of John*, 2:854. This suggestion is strengthened by the often-theological value of time in the Fourth Gospel; however, the Evangelist typically uses ὥρα (as in 2:4; 4:21, 23; 5:25, 28; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27 (twice); 13:1; 16:2, 4, 21, 25, 32; 17:1) to mark the time of Jesus’s impending Passion. He uses ἐνῴρῳ only here (11:49, 51) and in his later reference to Caiaphas (18:13), always in this same formula.

¹⁵ F.B. Craddock, *John* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 89. Ben Witherington III, *John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 205.

¹⁶ Sheba led a rebellion against David. When popular opinion turned against him, he took refuge in the city of Abel, which David’s general Joab subsequently besieged. Rather than allow the entire city to be destroyed, a “wise woman” struck a deal with Joab to hand kill Sheba in return for his sparing the city.

¹⁷ t. Ter 7.20 extrapolates this principle from the Sheba narrative; but see the reversed argued in m. Ter 8.12. Keener, *Gospel of John*, 2:855–56, offers a survey of opinions on the matter.

¹⁸ For this insight, I’d like to thank John W. Welch, for whom I served as a research assistant as an undergraduate. Welch has drawn connections between Deuteronomy 13 and the decision to execute Jesus in the Fourth Gospel in an as-yet-unpublished paper that I had the privilege to review. He makes a strong case that Jesus was executed as an apostate prophet in the mold of Deut 13.

The strong hand of the narrator is felt in this passage, as he immediately (after Caiaphas' words) interjects with his own interpretation. This sort of interruption is uncharacteristic of the Fourth Evangelist.¹⁹ Paul Duke writes,

the ironic testimony to the triumphant work of Jesus and the tragic death of a nation is so strong that the narrator will not risk its being missed. He breaks his usual silence to explain that these words were quite beyond the one who uttered them... by this intrusion the author probably weakens the force of the irony. But given the depth of meaning he perceives in these lines, we can hardly blame him for finally bursting out loud with his knowledge of the tragicomic truth.²⁰

In other places in his work, the Evangelist is quite content to allow the reader to independently navigate the narrational twists and turns and even throws a roadblock or two in the way to force the reader to reevaluate presuppositions. But here, at one of the Gospel's greatest moments of theological clarity, he does not allow for the possibility that his careful design will be overlooked.

Even though they are not the subject of this study, I would be remiss to pass by the stated effects of Jesus's death. Though Jesus is to "die for the nation" (ὕπερ τοῦ ἔθνους), it is not clear from this passage what Jesus's death saves the nation from (given the Johannine context, one might assume ἀμαρτία or perhaps the ὀργή or κρίσις of God).²¹ Interestingly, the Evangelist expands on Caiaphas' words to include the gathering of the "scattered (διεσκορπισμένα) children of God." If this is a reference to gathering in Israel from the Diaspora, this would certainly fulfill messianic expectations,²² but as Keener notes, "children of God" (τὰ τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ) in the Fourth Gospel typically refers to all who believe, regardless of nationality.²³ In this case, the

¹⁹ Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, CXXXVI, writes, "the evangelist simply presents such statements and leaves them unanswered... for he is certain that his believing readers will see the deeper truth."

²⁰ Paul Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 88.

²¹ Humanity's ἀμαρτία, "sinfulness" (1:29; 8:21, 24 (2), 34 (2); 9:41 (2); 15:22 (2), 24; 16:8, 9; 20:23) and God's ὀργή, "wrath" (3:36), and κρίσις, "judgment" (3:19; 5:22, 24, 27, 29, 30; 8:16; 12:31; 16:8, 11), are points of concern in the Fourth Gospel.

²² Köstenberger, *John*, 353.

²³ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 2:857.

prophecy foreshadows the coming of Gentile converts into the Christian church.²⁴ The reference to gathering (συναγάγη in v. 52) creates an unsettling *inclusio* with the beginning of the episode, where the chief priests and Pharisees gathered (συνήγαγον, v. 47) the Sanhedrin,²⁵ and the passage ends on an ominous note with the decision to execute Jesus.

Significant Elements of the Pericope

Now that I have treated the passage in detail, I narrow my focus to several elements that make the pericope especially significant. John 11:45–53 have attracted the attention of scholars for several important reasons. First, it is one of the only major episodes in the Gospel of John where Jesus is not present. For obvious theological and thematic reasons, the Evangelist avoids moving the story away from the narrative perspective of Jesus. Outside of 11:45–53, there are only three major episodes that do this. In 1:19–28 and 3:23–25, John the Baptist gives testimony about Jesus. In 7:45–52, the Jerusalem authorities attempt to arrest Jesus. Thus, while Jesus is not physically present in any of these episodes, they are still entirely *about* him. These previous episodes perhaps foreshadow 11:45–53, since the Caiaphas pericope contains both (unwitting) testimony about Jesus and a decision to take legal action against him.²⁶ At any rate, the fact that the Evangelist avoids shifting the narrative perspective away from Jesus suggests that any episode where this does occur should be regarded as especially important. This story was simply too important to omit, even if it transgresses the narrative conventions of the Gospel. Given the

²⁴ Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 442–43; Köstenberger, *John*, 353. Note also the slippage between λαός (v. 50), which is the more generic term, and ἔθνος (vv. 51, 52), which presumably refers to the Jewish nation.

²⁵ Köstenberger, *John*, 353.

²⁶ The relative scarcity of this perspective shift in the Fourth Gospel leads C.H. Dodd to conclude that this episode represents a bit of independent tradition received rather than composed by the Evangelist. C.H. Dodd, “The Prophecy of Caiaphas: John xi. 47–53,” in *More New Testament Studies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968) 59–60. Grimm supports this conclusion and endeavors to support it by providing historical context for it, “Die Priesgabe eines Menschen,” 133–34.

important role that 1:19–28 and 3:23–35 play in establishing Jesus’s identity, we should expect a similarly important declaration about Jesus in this episode.

Second, as C.H. Dodd has observed, the Caiaphas scene takes the form of a “pronouncement story.”²⁷ Such episodes are uncommon in the New Testament. It is striking that the Gospels rarely pause to explain the event upon which they are fixated: the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Johannine Jesus often focuses his teaching on his relationship with his Father, on the knowledge he has revealed, or on his mission and identity. Occasionally he does hint at his coming death (2:19; 3:14; 8:21; 10:17–18; 12:23–24, 32; 14:19; 16:5, 28), but even these references are characteristically (for John) cryptic. Nowhere in the text does Jesus give a theological exposition of his fate. Caiaphas’ statement (along with the Evangelist’s explanatory gloss) may be the most pointed explanation of his death in the Gospel.

Theologically, it fulfills a similar function to the ransom *logion* of Mark 10:45 (“for the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many”). Raymond Brown also notes the connection between these two passages.²⁸ These ideas, which suggest a substitutionary model of atonement, are not well-developed in the Gospels.²⁹ However, it is possible to trace a narrative theology in the story of the raising of Lazarus and the events that follow. Jesus decides to go to Bethany to save Lazarus, despite knowing that doing so will put his own life in danger (11:8–9). Thus, in a sense, Jesus exchanges his life for Lazarus’—a substitutionary sacrifice indeed.³⁰ This narrative backdrop gives some color to Caiaphas’ ironic

²⁷ Dodd, “The Prophecy of Caiaphas,” 60–63.

²⁸ Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 442.

²⁹ The penal substitution model of atonement is typically traced to Paul’s writings, such as Rom 3:21–26, which is itself an outgrowth of the Israelite system of sacrifice. See Martin Hengel, *The Atonement: A Study of the Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1981), 45.

³⁰ D.A. Carson writes, “both Caiaphas and John understand Jesus’ death to be substitutionary,” though in different senses. D.A. Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 422. Werner Grimm notes the connection between John 11:50 and Mark 10:45, but nuances the idea of a true substitutionary atonement in these verses: “Der Tod Jesu ist nicht exakt als Lösegeld-Tod.” Grimm, “Die Preisgabe eines Menschen,” 142–46.

observation that Jesus must die ὑπὲρ τοῦ λαοῦ.³¹ Caiaphas thus makes explicit what is implicit in the Lazarus story: the death of Jesus functions as a vicarious sacrifice on behalf of others. This is as direct an atonement theology as can be drawn from the Gospels.

Third, the episode may represent the Jewish trial of Jesus as it is presented in the Gospel of John. While the Fourth Gospel gives the fullest account of Jesus's interview with Pilate, the Johannine story of Jesus's appearance before the high priest and Jewish authorities (18:19–24) is notably shorter and less detailed than its Synoptic equivalents. Instead, John presents the decision to execute Jesus as having taken place months before his arrest, with the later appearance being a mere formality.³² Without taking a stance on which is more likely to be historical,³³ it seems reasonable to conclude that John 11:45–53 serves the same essential function as Matt 26:57–68, Mark 14:53–65, and Luke 22:63–71.

Fourth, John 11:45–53 is significant because it marks the “key transition point” between the Book of Signs and the Book of Glory.³⁴ It has long been the convention in Johannine studies to speak of the Gospel's division into two discrete narrative sections—the “Book of Signs” (2–11) and the “Book of Glory (12–20). Chapters 1 and 21 bookend these sections with a prologue and epilogue, respectively. The Book of Signs recounts in detail seven of Jesus's miracles. These miracles—turning water into wine (2:1–11); healing a royal official's son (4:46–54); healing a

³¹ Hengel places 11:50 in the category of “dying for the city and for friends,” within which there is room to understand a substitutionary atonement. Hengel, *The Atonement*, 14.

³² In fact, the reappearance of Caiaphas in 18:13–14 functions only to remind the reader of his prophecy in 11:50. In the formal trial of Jesus that parallels the Synoptics, Caiaphas' father-in-law and former high priest Annas takes a more active role (but only in the Fourth Gospel).

³³ Donald Senior has argued that the episode of 11:45–53 reflects a historical decision by the Jerusalem authorities to take legal action against Jesus. Donald Senior, “History and Theology in the Johannine Presentation of the Causes for the Death of Jesus: John 11:45–53 as Convergence Point,” 43–58 in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1: Critical Appraisals of Critical Views*, ed. Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, S.J., and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: SBL, 2007). D. Moody Smith argues that the logic of the passage “sets some store on the high priest's actually having made this prophecy.” Smith, *John*, 230. Craig S. Keener notes that features of the text “argue for early tradition, not necessarily historicity.” Keener, *Gospel of John*, 2:852.

³⁴ Senior, “History and Theology,” 43.

chronically ill man (5:1–9); multiplying bread and fish (6:1–14); walking on water (6:16–21); healing a blind man (9:1–12); and raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1–44)—are σημεῖα in the Greek. Each one of these σημεῖα is carefully calculated to reveal an aspect of Jesus’s divine nature and power.³⁵

Some of these miracles have Synoptic equivalents, others parallel Synoptic stories in one or more details, and still others appear entirely independent—but at any rate, they represent a carefully curated selection of narratives. The arrangement appears quite intentional, as the narrator draws attention to “the first of his signs” (2:11) and “second sign” (4:54). The σημεῖον motif continues throughout the Gospel (2:18, 23; 3:2; 4:48; 6:2, 14, 26, 30; 7:31; 9:16; 10:41; 11:47; 12:18, 37; 20:30), but after 4:54 the Evangelist does not interrupt the narrative to point them out, presumably assuming that his audience has caught on to his design. As σημεῖα, they are intended to teach something about Jesus; indeed, Jesus often uses them as a springboard for his teaching. They are also an important plot device, as outsiders’ reactions to the miracles drive the narrative forward. The σημεῖα are almost always met with controversy; some observers believe in Jesus while others react with violent hostility. This hostility reaches a murderous pitch fairly early in the ministry of Jesus (5:18), but it is not until the seventh and final sign that the attempts on Jesus’s life take on an organized nature.

³⁵ The precise symbolic value of each σημεῖον is not always clear to the modern interpreter. The water-to-wine miracle certainly represents Jesus’s power over the elements; it may also allude to his creative power or function as a symbol of the incarnation (for the latter, see Eric Huntsman, “‘And the Word Was Made Flesh’: A Latter-Day Saint Exegesis of the Blood and Water Imagery in the Gospel of John,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 1 (2009): 51–65.) The miracles in 4:46–54 and 5:1–9 demonstrate healing power; the latter also demonstrates Jesus’s authority over the Sabbath and ability to give life (5:21), a specifically divine prerogative in the Hebrew Bible (Deut 32:39). The multiplication of bread and fish recalls the Lord’s providence during the Exodus and anticipates the sacrifice of Jesus wherein he will offer his flesh and blood as (eternal) life-giving sustenance (6:53–58). Walking on water again identifies Jesus with the God of the Hebrew Bible, who wields power over the chaotic deep (Gen 1:2; Ps 29:3; 74:13; 89:9). The blind man’s healing teaches a lesson about spiritual blindness (9:39–41) and Jesus’s ability to bring sight and realization to those who believe. Finally, the resurrection of Lazarus clearly points to Jesus’s own resurrection both as a prefiguration of it and as the proximate cause for the death of Jesus. In this latter respect, it may also signify the substitutionary power of Jesus’s death (hinted at in 10:15 and made explicit in the prophecy of Caiaphas).

As Senior observes,

the drama of 11:45–53 is not isolated in the Johannine narrative but is the culmination of a series of hostile reactions throughout the public ministry of Jesus [...] What is new and unique in 11:45–53, compared to the earlier expressions of hostility on the part of the Jewish authorities, is *the explicit link of their concern to the threat of Roman intervention*.³⁶

Once Rome enters the picture, Jesus and his movement cannot be tolerated any longer. At this point, the narrative shifts to the Book of Glory and parallels the Synoptic Passion Narratives. Appropriately, it is one of the “signs” that triggers this shift—the raising of Lazarus. From this episode on, the plot centers not on the ministry and teaching of Jesus, but on his impending death and the rising opposition among the priestly class that prompts it.

The Historical Caiaphas

In this study, I do not press the distinction between the historical figure of Joseph ben Caiaphas and the literary character in the Fourth Gospel since only the latter is of concern. However, I will note a few important historical details about the high priest, especially as they shed light on his characterization in John. From the few sources that exist, a few things can be established with relative certainty about Joseph ben Caiaphas.³⁷ He was high priest from 18–36/7

³⁶ Senior, “History and Theology,” 50, 51.

³⁷ Matthew (26:3, 57), Luke (3:2), and John (11:49; 18:13, 14, 24, 28) each mention Caiaphas by name, whereas Mark only refers to him by his title ἀρχιερέυς (14:47, 53, 54, 60, 61, 63). However, these accounts are only concerned with Caiaphas in terms of his involvement in Jesus’s death (or in establishing a chronological marker for Jesus’s ministry as in Luke 3:2) and offer no details on his larger career. Josephus offers a few historical kernels about the career of Caiaphas. He gives us a chronological marker of Caiaphas’ appointment which figures (when cross-referenced with reliably datable Roman events) to a date of 18 CE. Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae*, 18.2.2. Josephus later mentions the removal of Caiaphas from office upon a visit to Jerusalem from Vitellius, which occurred in either 36 or 37 CE. In either case, Caiaphas was the longest-tenured high priest of the first century, and most scholars see the length of his term in office as an indicator of his “effectiveness” and ability to cooperate and work with Roman authorities—a relationship that underlies the Gospel accounts of Jesus’s trial. Adele Reinhartz, *Caiaphas the High Priest* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 13. His involvement in the death of Jesus seems fairly certain. The (in)famous *Testimonium Flavianum* of Josephus (*AJ* 18.2.2), even when divested of likely later Christian interpolations, has Jesus executed “through the indictment of the leading men” (ἐνδείξει τῶν πρώτων ἀνδρῶν). Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae*, 18.3.3, my translation. This descriptor is used often by Josephus to refer to the Jewish temple aristocracy, and his statement thus corroborates the Gospels’ account of a “two-stage trial” in front of first Jewish and then Roman authorities. Helen K. Bond, *Caiaphas: Friend of Rome and Judge of Jesus?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 62. Bond argues for the

CE, including the entire length of Pontius Pilate’s governorship. The length of his tenure indicates both a good working relationship with Rome and the fact that he performed his priestly functions well.³⁸ In this regard, he seems to have navigated the political tightrope between satisfying the Roman authorities above him and his Jewish constituents below. In the passage at hand, we see John’s Caiaphas operating in this precarious position. We may presume that this political expediency accounts for his astounding term of office in an era in which most other high priests were only retained for a year or two. The cool, pragmatic logic that he demonstrates in 11:50—which seems to have served him so well—will prove to be (in the Evangelist’s eyes, at least) his undoing. Finally, and most importantly for this study, it seems fairly certain that he was involved—in some way, shape, or form—in the execution of Jesus.

Because of this, Caiaphas has long been vilified in Christian tradition as the architect of Jesus’s death. Over the centuries, his villainous persona expanded into roles such as the bogeyman of medieval passion plays³⁹ or as a corrupt embodiment of establishment, ritual-based religion.⁴⁰ For this reason, John 11:45–53 have played an unfortunate role in certain strands of Christian anti-Judaism. Just as with other parts of the Fourth Gospel that have been weaponized for antisemitic purposes, this must be grappled with. As a general rule, appreciating the nuances of the Fourth Gospel—particularly its position as an intra-Jewish debate, not an outside criticism

authenticity of this statement in the *Testimonium Flavianum*. There does not seem to be any significant reason to doubt the Gospels’ claim that Jesus was executed by Roman officials but at the instigation of the temple aristocracy. As a historical footnote, in 1990 a first-century tomb was discovered to the south of Jerusalem, in which was an ossuary with the inscription יהושף בר קפא, “Joseph, son of Caiaphas.” While all of the discoverers were quick to identify the tomb with the first-century high priest, other scholars have been more cautious. Despite the demands of the popular imagination, a definitive answer to this question is unlikely. Bond, *Caiaphas*, 1–8.

³⁸ As imagined in the Hebrew Bible, the high priest held office for life; certainly, there was no established length of office. During the Roman occupation of Judea, however, the local Roman authorities (beginning with the precedent sent by Pompey during his eastern campaign) assumed the right of bestowing the office. Given the implicit political power of such an office and the volatile nature of the region, this appointment rarely lasted more than a year or two.

³⁹ Adele Reinhartz, *Caiaphas the High Priest* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 96–123.

⁴⁰ Bond, *Caiaphas*, 13.

of Judaism—can resolve some of the more problematic interpretations of the text. I, in turn, will seek to nuance the characterization of Caiaphas in the final chapter of this study.

Some Notes About Caiaphas and the Nature of Prophecy

That in first-century Judaism the high priest was assumed to have prophetic capabilities is well attested.⁴¹ It is clear from Hebrew Bible passages such as Numbers 27:21 and 2 Samuel 15:27 that even in the time of the First Temple, the high priest was associated with divination and seership. Josephus, a priest and would-be prophet himself, regarded John Hyrcanus as both high priest and prophet,⁴² and the thread of priestly prophecy can be traced throughout his writings. Philo's ideal priest also possesses prophet abilities.⁴³

In fact, the logic of the passage depends on Caiaphas' ability to prophesy. The irony, then, is not that he does prophesy, but that, prophesying, he does not understand his own meaning (or even, perhaps, that he is prophesying). This sort of unconscious prophecy, too, was not unknown in Second Temple Judaism.⁴⁴ Philo has the Lord direct the seer Balaam thus: "I will direct your speech, prophesying each detail through your tongue, though, all the while, you do not understand it."⁴⁵ The Rabbis read Exodus 2:6 and 15:17 as examples of unconscious

⁴¹ I take some issue with Köstenberger's claim, "Apparently, in the relative vacuum of prophetic voices in the Second Temple period, the priestly class claimed the gift of prophecy for itself," considering that the high priest was already associated with divination in First Temple Israel and that its prophetic prerogatives were recognized by individuals like Philo who were not associated with the priesthood. One need not see this claim as a usurpation. Moreover, the idea that there was a "relative vacuum" in this period may be founded upon problematic assumptions. Certainly some ideas and conceptions about prophecy had changed from the period of the Israelite monarchy, but there was no shortage of voices claiming divine authority. Köstenberger, *John*, 352.

⁴² Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae*, 13.10.7.

⁴³ Philo, *De specialibus legibus* IV.36 (192). Philo also notes that the ability to prophesy comes more from virtue than birth, which seems to contradict the Evangelist's idea that the prophecy came as a result of Caiaphas' office rather than his personal merit.

⁴⁴ "The view that utterances could on occasion have a deeper prophetic meaning is found elsewhere in Judaism, though not with particular reference to the high priest, and prophecy was often considered to be unwitting." Köstenberger, *John*, 353. See also "Oracular utterances frequently proved notoriously ambiguous and misinterpreted until their fulfillment [...] the one who prophesied was not responsible for, or the originator of, his or her words." Keener, *Gospel of John*, 2:856, 857.

⁴⁵ Philo, *De vita Mosis*, I.49 (274); see also I.50 (277); I.51 (283); I.52 (286).

prophecy on the part of Pharaoh's daughter and the children of Israel, respectively.⁴⁶ This suggests that in early Judaism, the ability to produce a prophecy and the ability to correctly identify and interpret the same were not necessarily conflated.

The popularly understood difficulty of interpreting prophecy is reflected in Greco-Roman sources as well. Glenn S. Holland writes of the Greek oracles, “whatever the reality of historical response from oracular shrines may have been, the popular perception reflected in legend and literature is that oracles are *characteristically* enigmatic and likely to find fulfillment in unexpected ways.”⁴⁷ Thus, not only were oracular responses likely to be ambiguous, misleading, and deceptive, they were *expected* to be.

The classic example from antiquity is the story of Croesus, king of Lydia, who inquired of several oracles “whether he should send an army against the Persians.”⁴⁸ The answer was that “if he should send an army against the Persians, he would destroy a great empire.”⁴⁹ Thus assured of victory, Croesus marched against Cyrus, only to find that the great empire he had destroyed was his own. Like Caiaphas, Croesus' tragic downfall was the result of the misunderstanding of inspired words; however, Croesus failed to misunderstand the oracular declaration, not his own words. The Caiaphas story, then, unites the elements of unconscious prophecy with those of the unexpected fulfillment of divine words. While there is certainly some tragic irony in the story of Croesus, it does not amount to the “irony of self-betrayal” that Caiaphas falls victim to.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ b. Sotah 12b claims that the daughter of Pharaoh “prophesied unknowingly” about Moses (שְׁפָתַי תְּנַבְּאָה לְפָנָיו מִדְּעָתָהּ); b. BB 119b explains the children of Israel's curious use of the third person pronoun in Exod 15:17 as an unconscious prophecy that not they but their children will enter the land of Canaan (שְׁמֵי תִנְבְּאִין וְאִיִּן יוֹדְעִין מֶה מִתְנַבְּאִין).

⁴⁷ Glenn S. Holland, *Divine Irony* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2000), 67, emphasis original.

⁴⁸ Herodotus, *Historiae*, 1.53. My translation.

⁴⁹ Herodotus, *Historiae*, 1.53.

⁵⁰ D.C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen & Co, 1969), 107.

John 11:50 in the Commentary Tradition

It would be remiss to move on without considering the contributions that previous scholars have made to the discussion of Caiaphas' prophecy. Obviously, it is impossible to reproduce the entirety of the robust commentary tradition here. Instead, I have selected a few samples based on stature, relevance, and utility. In addition, I have not included their comments on the entire pericope; rather, I have limited my selections to their comments on the nature of Caiaphas' unintentional prophecy in 11:50.

Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (1964):

“In Wahrheit wird dieser Satz in einem ganz anderen Sinne Geltung gewinnen als Kaiaphas meint, und dieser erscheint so im Lichte tragischer Ironie als Prophet wider Wissen und Willen.”⁵¹

Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (1969):

“Caiaphas was right; the death of Jesus would save the nation from destruction. Yet Caiaphas could not suspect that Jesus would die, not in place of Israel but on behalf of the true Israel”⁵²

D. Moody Smith, *John* (1999):

“His statement, in which he advocates the expedient course for the survival of the people and nation, is politically understandable and certainly, from his perspective, correct [but also] true, albeit in a sense far different than he intended.”⁵³

Klaus Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium* (2001):

“Für die Leser- und Hörerschaft des Evangeliums sagt damit der Hohepriester viel mehr, als er selbst in der dargestellten Situation meinen kann.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ Bultmann, *Evangelium des Johannes*, 314. “In reality, this saying will come true in an entirely different sense than Caiaphas intends, and, in the light of tragic irony, he appears as a prophet despite his knowledge and intent.”

⁵² Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 442.

⁵³ Smith, *John*, 230.

⁵⁴ Klaus Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium* (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kolhammer, 2001), 2:41. “For the reader and audience of the Gospel, the high priest says much more than he himself can mean in the present situation.”

Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John* (2003):

“John declares that the high priest inadvertently uttered truth that differed considerably from the message he interpreted as truth.”⁵⁵

Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (2004)

“The evangelist discerned in the high priest’s pronouncement a deeper meaning, unknown to Caiaphas himself [...] Ironically in Jesus’ case, however, this coincided perfectly with God’s plan.”⁵⁶

The most common observation made by these commentators is that Caiaphas fails to understand his own words. I have explored the idea of unconscious prophecy above, as do many of the commentators in their own works. While some use the word “irony” and others describe aspects of the passage that fit into models of irony,⁵⁷ none give a robust examination of the episode in ironological terms. By establishing a firm framework and methodology for irony in the next chapter, I aim to classify and evaluate the irony of the passage more systematically than has been done before.

⁵⁵ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 2:856.

⁵⁶ Köstenberger, *John*, 352.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Wengst’s remarks on the multifaceted speaking situation, a hallmark of ironology.

CHAPTER THREE: IRONY, EASIER IN PRACTICE THAN IN THEORY

Defining irony is no simple matter. Indeed, this seems to be about the only thing that all scholars of irony can agree on. What makes definition all the more frustrating is that irony is often easily recognizable; humanity almost seems to have an innate sense for it.⁵⁸ In this sense, one may say that irony is easier in practice than in theory. It is tempting to adopt Justice Stewart's "I know it when I see it" approach and pursue the matter no further.

However, a scholarly examination of irony must be more robust than this. Though the effects of irony can be felt even in passing interaction, a full appreciation of its nuances requires a thorough evaluation. In this study, I do not set forth a new, all-expansive definition of irony or propose new categories for its study. Rather, I will survey the writings of literary critics and dramatic authors to draw on some general observations and taxonomies that will prove useful in the interpretation of John 11:45–53. I will summarize these findings at the end of the chapter before examining the Caiaphas pericope against them in the following section.

Irony in Antiquity and Modernity

Perhaps counterintuitively, I will begin my survey of ironology with modern commentators and literary critics before moving to ancient writings on irony. I do this because the Greek εἰρωνεία does not cover the same expanse of meaning that the English *irony* does, and thus beginning the study there would lay an inaccurate foundation.⁵⁹ The modern concept of irony is more expansive, nuanced, and includes phenomena that ancient authors would not have

⁵⁸ Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 8. In an age where it is not fashionable to discuss the universals of the human experience, irony seems to be the exception.

⁵⁹ "The Greeks' use of the words *eirōn* and *eirōneia* touches only the tip of a massive mountain of ideas, assumptions, and styles which the ancients did not call irony but which properly deserves the name." Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 10.

classified as εἰρωνεία or its Latin near equivalent *dissimulatio*.⁶⁰ An εἴρων was someone, such as Socrates, who, being more than he let on, feigned ignorance, and εἰρωνεία “was primarily a mode of behavior,” not a phenomenon.⁶¹ This does not mean that the irony (as understood in its modern sense) would not have been observed in antiquity—in fact, it seems certain that it was—only that it would not have been classified under that name.⁶² Therefore, it will be important to first examine some of the characteristics of what is, in modern usage, irony and only then to decide how the ancient texts factor into this discussion.

(Aborted) Definitions and Cautiously Proposed Characteristics

Evidently unaware of the predicament that defining irony would present to later theorists, the eighteenth-century English rhetorician Thomas Gibbons confidently defines the term as “a Trope... in which we speak one thing, and design another, in order to give the greater force and vehemence to our meaning.”⁶³ Gibbons’ definition is an accurate enough description of verbal irony, but it fails to cover the nuances of ironies such as situational irony, dramatic irony, or divine irony (each of these will be described in turn). Moreover, Gibbons does not offer any criteria to distinguish irony from related devices such as sarcasm, hyperbole, or understatement. Gibbons’ definition is simple and attractive, but not so comprehensive as to cover the vast range of meaning (or subversion thereof) that irony entails.

⁶⁰ Claire Colebrook notes, in speaking of ancient sources, “there are instances of language that we can now identify as ironic, even if they were not explicitly labelled as such.” Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 6.

⁶¹ Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 10.

⁶² D.C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, The Critical Idiom 13 (New York: Methuen, 1982), 15.

“Irony is not only as mysterious as love, but almost as ancient and universal as well. It has been said that irony is virtually as old as speech itself, and experts claim that it has been present in all cultures, at least in its oral form.” Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 8.

⁶³ Thomas Gibbons, *Rhetoric; or, a View of its Principal Tropes and Figures* (London: J. and W. Oliver in Bartholomew-Close, 1767), 77.

One of the first modern writers to articulate the difficulties associated with irony was D.C. Muecke, whose prolific writings on irony provide some of the most important theoretical framework for this study. In his 1969 work *The Compass of Irony*, Muecke notes the difficulty of establishing any sort of “formal definitions” of irony.⁶⁴ This is, in large part, due to its subjectivity: “irony, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder and is not a quality inherent in any remark, event, or situation.”⁶⁵ Katherine Barbe likewise writes, “I try to avoid the term *definition*,” preferring instead to provide a “characterization or description.”⁶⁶ Steven Pattinson notes the recent interest in irony from various linguistic fields, labeling their prescriptive methodologies as a “top-down approach.”⁶⁷ However, recognizing the difficulty in imposing an all-inclusive definition on irony, he, like Muecke and Barbe, prefers a “bottom-up,” descriptive approach.⁶⁸ Though such an approach would surely draw the ire of Plato, it is a far more productive exercise to describe and characterize irony than it is to define it.⁶⁹

Muecke proposes that irony generally fits the following set of criteria: it is “double-layered;” there is “some kind of opposition between the two levels;” and a sort of “innocence” is shown with reference to the opposition, either through an overconfident or pretended unawareness.⁷⁰ Pattinson’s four broad categories of ironic characteristics differ somewhat from Muecke’s: 1) a difference between what is said and what is believed accompanied by an

⁶⁴ Muecke, *Compass of Irony*, 14.

⁶⁵ Muecke, *Compass of Irony*, 14.

⁶⁶ Katharina Barbe, *Irony in Context* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1995), 9.

⁶⁷ Steven Pattinson, *Characterising Irony: A Systematic Approach to Literary and Linguistic Texts* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 2.

⁶⁸ Pattinson, *Characterising Irony*, 3.

⁶⁹ Perhaps somewhere in the world of forms, there exists a perfectly precise and all-inclusive definition of irony, but for the time being we must make do with the dim shadows of characterizations.

⁷⁰ Muecke, *Compass of Irony*, 19–20. In his 1970 work simply entitled *Irony*, Muecke adds to his attributes of irony thus: “the basic features [of irony are] a confident unawareness (real or pretended), a contrast of appearance and reality, a comic element, an element of detachment, and an aesthetic element.” D.C. Muecke, *Irony* (London: Methuen & Co, 1970), 48. However, I find Muecke’s original formulation more objective and easier to work with.

opposition between these; 2) some sort of signal (he lists contradiction, exaggeration, gestures, unconventional word choice, and shifts of style, among others, as possibilities); 3) context (such as cultural or linguistic details); and 4) intention (including the intent to conceal (in the case of the victim) or reveal (in the case of the observer) information).⁷¹

Pattinson has thus collapsed Muecke's first two criteria into one and places greater emphasis on communication and intention. Barbe, on the other hand, pushes back against the idea that "ironic intentions" must be present in a situation for it to be termed irony—observing the circularity of assuming intent in the case of something as inherently subjective as irony.⁷² Though Barbe is surely right that authorial intent is not necessary for a text to be read as ironic,⁷³ Wayne Booth will demonstrate that the issue of intent is important when characterizing the *nature* of the irony involved (see the discussion on stability below).

In addition to his criteria for *identifying* irony, Muecke provides a set of criteria by which to *classify* irony. A set of three binary variables (for which the possible answers are yes/no or a similar equivalent), produces a fourfold characterization of irony into the categories of comic, satiric, tragic, and nihilistic.⁷⁴ The three variables are as follows:

- 1) What is the ironist's attitude towards the victim? (positive/negative)
- 2) What is the victim's fate? (positive/negative)
- 3) Does reality reflect the values of the ironist or humanity generally? (yes/no)

I have shown the possible permutations in the chart below:

ironist's attitude toward the victim and the victim's fate	classification of irony	does reality reflect the values of the ironist and humanity?
positive attitude	Comic	Yes
victim's fate is positive		

⁷¹ Pattinson, *Characterising Irony*, 16, 23.

⁷² Barbe, *Irony in Context*, 11.

⁷³ See Colebrook's comments about ironic "re-reading" of texts beyond authorial intent. Colebrook, *Irony*, 9.

⁷⁴ Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, 51.

negative attitude	Satiric	
victim's fate is negative		
positive attitude	Tragic	No
victim's fate is negative		
negative attitude	Nihilistic	
victim's fate is negative		

Muecke does not explore the implications of these four labels, but is clear enough that they are relevant for questions of genre and authorial perspective.

In this study, I find it best to avoid introducing another problematic definition into the study of irony. Instead of applying a definition, then, I will adopt Muecke's threefold characterization as my basic standard for identifying irony. However, the features of irony that Pattinson notes, such as signals, context, and intention will also form an important part of my analysis. I will examine these further in the following survey as well as in my application of ironic theory to John 11:45–53. In this process of application (contained in the following chapter), I will also return to Muecke's classification criteria in detail.

Form, Structure, and Interplay: How Irony Works

David S. Kaufer makes some important observations about the structure of irony. He begins by laying out some of the basic premises of ironic speech. Like humor, irony is inherently subjective but requires some degree of cooperation or mutual recognition between the parties involved. As Claire Colebrook notes, irony is predicated upon the cooperative principle—"we speak in order to be understood."⁷⁵ Irony typically requires the interplay of two (or three) parties: an ironist, an observer, and occasionally a victim. The *ironist* is the creator or revealer of the irony, who juxtaposes incompatible meanings or exposes the incongruity of a situation.⁷⁶ The

⁷⁵ Colebrook, *Irony*, 13.

⁷⁶ When there is no clear ironist, in the case of "the irony of the robber robbed," the ironist is perceived as a personified fate or perhaps a divine intermediary. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, 36.

observer does “not create... but may appreciate” irony by grasping the ironist’s true intentions.⁷⁷ An ironist, thus, intends for the meaning to be grasped by at the observer. However, this can only happen if there are linguistic and cultural norms (note Pattinson’s criterion of context) shared between the speaker and listener; otherwise, there would be no way for the ironist to signal the true intentions.⁷⁸ The *victim* fails to appreciate the irony and sometimes is not even aware of it.⁷⁹ The effect of the irony comes at the victim’s expense. If the observer does not understand the ironist’s intent and takes his or her words at face value, the irony is lost. Irony cannot exist where there is a victim but not an observer. These roles can overlap, such as in situational irony—where the same party at once observes the irony and also assigns ironic meaning to the situation by interpreting it, making them both the ironist and observer.⁸⁰

Gibbons lists several means by which the speaker/writer may signal that the irony differs from his or her “real sentiments,” such as “the accent, the air, the extravagance of the praise, the character of the person, the nature of the thing, or the vein of the discourse.”⁸¹ “Accent” and “air” can only function as signals in verbal irony, but the rest of Gibbons’ signals are created in the space between what is actually said and what is expected or appropriate.

Drawing upon semantic theory, Kaufer demonstrates that meaning is not produced through words alone, but rather through the combination of speech and its “speaking context.”⁸² When “irony is created by the speaker or situation, its impact is predicated on an audience’s juxtaposing the speaker’s statement and implied intentions with the speaking *situation*.”⁸³ A “speaking situation” takes account of the sort of meaning dictated by the context. The

⁷⁷ David S. Kaufer, “Irony, Interpretive Form, and the Theory of Meaning,” *Poetics Today* 4.3 (1983): 452.

⁷⁸ Colebrook, *Irony*, 12.

⁷⁹ Kaufer, “Irony, Interpretive Form, and the Theory of Meaning,” 453.

⁸⁰ Kaufer, “Irony, Interpretive Form, and the Theory of Meaning,” 452–53.

⁸¹ Gibbons, *Rhetoric*, 77.

⁸² Kaufer, “Irony, Interpretive Form, and the Theory of Meaning,” 460.

⁸³ Kaufer, “Irony, Interpretive Form, and the Theory of Meaning,” 461.

combination of speech, perspective, and irony convey the speaker's intentions. When the observer understands that the speaking situation dictates an interpretation contrary to their face-value meaning, they can recognize and appreciate irony. Whether signaled through "extravagance" or some other sort of disconnection between the speech and reality, it is important that an ironist makes his or her ironic intentions clear to the observer.

Stability and Negativity

Another important aspect of irony is its *stability*. Wayne C. Booth is largely responsible for theorizing the stability of irony. In his estimation, stable irony has four qualities: 1) it is "*intended*, deliberately created by human beings to be... understood;" 2) it is "*covert*," meaning that the ironic meaning must be ascertained without an overt statement indicating the irony; 3) it is "*stable*... once a reconstruction of meaning has been made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions;" and 4) it is "*finite*," limited to a specific context.⁸⁴

Unstable irony, on the other hand, is not limited to a particular context or interpretation. "The only sure affirmation is that negation that begins all ironic play," the idea that apparent meaning is not to be trusted.⁸⁵ This is Søren Kierkegaard's conception of irony, which he imagines as "infinite absolute negativity."⁸⁶ In his own words, "it is negativity, because it only negates; it is infinite, because it does not negate this or that phenomenon; it is absolute, because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that still is not. The irony establishes nothing, because that which is to be established lies behind it."⁸⁷ Kierkegaard's irony is a purely

⁸⁴ Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 5–6.

⁸⁵ Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*, 240. Booth also notes that "pursued to its logical extremes," this radical deconstruction of meaning would lead to a sort of literary nihilism. Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*, 244.

⁸⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, "The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates," in *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 28.

⁸⁷ Kierkegaard, "The Concept of Irony," 28.

destructive force. While Booth has managed to tame other ironies, placing them under the supervision of their local contexts, this radically unstable irony cannot be limited or controlled by any authorial intent. Most literary ironies, especially those that predate the advent of postmodern thought, demonstrate a high level of stability.

Ironic Intentions: What Purpose Does Irony Serve?

We now turn to the *why* of irony—what is the function of it, and why have authors across time and cultures returned to it as a way of communicating ideas and representing reality? Muecke, in his 1982 work *Irony and the Ironic*, observes that irony has been an important part of the human condition from the beginning: “the history of thought is the record of the recurrent discovery that what we assured ourselves was the truth, was in truth only a seeming truth.”⁸⁸ He also makes the important point that irony has existed and been observed and felt far longer than the corresponding concept or word came into circulation.⁸⁹ This is important to note, as ancient authors do not often speak of irony in terms similar to modern literary critics—but this does not mean that modern notions and descriptions of irony are inappropriate to apply to ancient texts. From the beginning, humanity seems to have had an acute sense for what we now call the “ironic.”

Kierkegaard is very much interested in the ontological implications of irony—as a way of approaching reality rather than as a literary technique. “The manifold variety of actuality,” the inherent tension between two poles of existence, he argues, “is the very element of the ironist.”⁹⁰ In Kierkegaard’s mind, irony is produced when reality as it has been understood begins to be

⁸⁸ Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, 4. In a sense, this may contradict his earlier statement that “irony... is not a quality inherent in any remark, event, or situation.” Muecke, *Compass of Irony*, 14.

⁸⁹ Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, 15.

⁹⁰ Kierkegaard, “The Concept of Irony,” 21.

“displaced” by “the new.”⁹¹ In this shifting of actualities, the ironist’s role is not to portent things to come nor to contend on behalf of the new. Rather, knowing “that the present does not match the idea,” he serves as something of a backward-facing prophet, confronting an obsolete reality.⁹² For Kierkegaard, irony is not, and cannot be, a constructive concept—and yet it is an essential part of comprehending the relationship between the once-understood and the yet-to-be. Kierkegaard’s view of irony as a bridge between modes of existence would have likely found resonance with the Fourth Evangelist, who saw the coming of Jesus as an event that fundamentally transformed the nature of reality.

In addition to its ontological allure, irony serves important purposes as a literary device. Gibbons argues that the purpose of irony is “to give the greater force and vehemence to our meaning.”⁹³ Kaufer echoes this by describing irony as “emphasis through negation.”⁹⁴ Like litotes, hyperbole, and understatement, irony (ironically, as it turns out) creates emphasis by saying something other than what is meant. Gibbons also notes that ironies are most powerful when their contrastive powers are employed most starkly: “the plumes of the raven never appear with so deep a jet, as when he is walking over a track of unsullied snow.”⁹⁵

Theorists also note that irony’s emphatic power is especially valuable for corrective purposes. “Ironies,” Gibbons writes, “may be very serviceable to correct vice and hypocrisy, and dash pride and insolence out of countenance.”⁹⁶ Perhaps because of its evasive, subversive nature, ironic speech can penetrate the false illusions of pretension in a way that a more direct assault cannot. Muecke similarly observes that in “Simple Irony... an apparently or ostensibly

⁹¹ Kierkegaard, “The Concept of Irony,” 28.

⁹² Kierkegaard, “The Concept of Irony,” 28.

⁹³ Gibbons, *Rhetoric*, 77.

⁹⁴ Kaufer, “Irony, Interpretive Form, and the Theory of Meaning,” 453.

⁹⁵ Gibbons, *Rhetoric*, 83.

⁹⁶ Gibbons, *Rhetoric*, 81.

true statement, serious question, valid assumption, or legitimate expectation is corrected, invalidated, or frustrated by the ironist's real meaning, by the true state of affairs, or by what actually happens."⁹⁷ This corrective is accomplished by placing the subject of the irony "in whatever context will invalidate it or correct it."⁹⁸ Muecke thus explains Gibbon's moralizing tool in terms of Kaufer's "speaking situation." The ironist has no need to explain the true thrust of his or her speech, so long as the context is sufficiently clear.

Colebrook notes a final, important purpose of irony: exclusion. While the observer is intended to understand the ironist's meaning, irony may also be used to conceal one's true intentions from the ironic victim. This "allows the speaker to remain 'above' what he says, allowing those members of his audience to share his urbanity to perceive the true sense of what is really meant."⁹⁹ Irony has an exclusionary power through which it separates the privileged insider (the observer) from the ignorant outsider (the victim).¹⁰⁰

Irony, then, serves several important functions. It satisfies humanity's sense for the complexity of reality and the uncertainty of human knowledge. As a literary technique, it creates emphasis through contrast and has an especially potent corrective power. And finally, the disconnection between its two levels of meaning creates a sharp distinction between those who perceive "the true sense" and those who do not. Irony naturally separates its spectators into privileged observers and excluded victims.

Divine Irony

⁹⁷ Muecke, *Compass of Irony*, 23.

⁹⁸ Muecke, *Compass of Irony*, 23.

⁹⁹ Colebrook, *Irony*, 14–15.

¹⁰⁰ See also Pattinson, "Irony is described as having an 'elitist', excluding function for those who do not have the requisite contextual resources, while conveying a rich, underlying sense for those in the know." Pattinson, *Characterising Irony*, 23.

Glenn S. Holland isolates a particular strand of irony, “divine irony,” that is especially relevant for the current study. Though he compares irony to sensory perception,¹⁰¹ Holland claims that, “irony is a result of the human capacity for mental detachment from the stream of experience.”¹⁰² Since the ironist is necessarily detached from the object of ironic observation, those in possession of the divine perspective, detached as it is from the human sphere, are uniquely qualified to ironize mortal matters: “the aspirations, presumptions, and struggles of an errant humanity were laid bare to the eyes of gods who knew what the human beings they observed did not know.”¹⁰³ What makes irony divine, then, is that the ironist is a god—or at least someone who has been given the privileged opportunity of sharing in the divine perspective.

Of particular importance are Holland’s observations about divine communication, oracular responses, and prophecy. I have quoted above his remark that oracles were expected to be “*characteristically* enigmatic”—difficult to interpret precisely because divine communication required the gods’ knowledge to be interpreted in the confusing and fallible mortal plane.¹⁰⁴ “Whatever the reality of oracular responses may have been,” Holland writes, “the common perception was that they exhibited what we have styled divine irony, based on a literal or surface meaning which leads the consultant to act in a certain way or believe a certain things, and a deeper, true level which reveals the meaning the god had intended.”¹⁰⁵ This duality of meaning—

¹⁰¹ Holland, *Divine Irony*, 21

¹⁰² Holland, *Divine Irony*, 37.

¹⁰³ Holland, *Divine Irony*, 64.

¹⁰⁴ “These oracles come to be perceived as enigmatic, however, when the apparently straightforward meaning of the oracle is contradicted by events that reveal the true meaning, which is invariably consistent with the semantic meaning but previously unperceived.” Holland, *Divine Irony*, 67.

For a useful survey of the complexity of divine foreknowledge (and its mediation to humans through divination) as understood in antiquity, see Dylan M. Burns, “Did God Know All Along?” in *Did God Care? Providence, Dualism, and Will in Later Greek and Early Christian Philosophy*, Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition 25 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 191–222.

¹⁰⁵ Holland, *Divine Irony*, 68.

at one level mundane and poorly-informed and at another transcendent and enlightened—is characteristic of Caiaphas’ prophecy.

With a proper understanding of these features of irony, classified and described by modern literary critics, we are now prepared to examine irony in ancient sources. While the modern theorists surveyed above have provided an important framework for evaluating the irony of John 11:45–53, the ancient sources that I deal with in detail below are relevant for the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel as a significant part of its first century literary milieu.

Ancient Appraisals of Irony

Ancient authors rarely discuss irony (εἰρωνεία) as such. However, I will discuss a few uses before moving on to dramatic irony, which has a much larger footprint in antiquity. The beginnings of irony are often traced to Socrates, with whom the concept of εἰρωνεία is associated in Plato’s dialogues.¹⁰⁶ Whereas the term is used in contemporary works with a negative connotation, this does not seem to be the case in Plato. Colebrook writes,

The first significant instances of the Greek word *eironeia* occur in the dialogues of Plato (428–347 BC), with reference to Socrates. It is here that *eironeia* no longer meant straightforward lying, as it did for Aristophanes, but an intended simulation which the audience or hearer was meant to recognise.¹⁰⁷

This new conception of εἰρωνεία made it a useful tool for correction and instruction.

“Socrates often spoke as though he were ignorant or respectful, precisely when he wished to expose his interlocutor’s ignorance.”¹⁰⁸ This air of ignorance put on by Socrates recalls Muecke’s observation that irony requires an “element of unawareness”—real or pretended.

¹⁰⁶ However, the conceptualization of Socrates as the Platonic ideal of an εἰρων is more modern than ancient. Kierkegaard pictures Socrates as the ideal ironist, situated “between the ideal... and the empirical.” Kierkegaard, “The Concept of Irony,” 21.

¹⁰⁷ Colebrook, *Irony*, 4.

¹⁰⁸ Colebrook, *Irony*, 1.

The “counterpart and enemy” of the Socratic ironist, the εἴρων, is the ἀλαζών.¹⁰⁹ A stock character, the ἀλαζών is distinguished by overbearing confidence. “While the *eirōn* presented himself as less than he really was, the *alazōn* vaunted himself as more.”¹¹⁰ It is this opposition between these two parties, representing things as they really are and things as they seem to be, respectively (the equivalents, anciently understood, of the ironist and victim), that opens the door for irony.¹¹¹

Cicero discusses *dissimulatio* as a simple tool of wit—feigned ignorance or cleverly unfitting epithets—used for comic effect.¹¹² Although the occasional biting sarcasm found in his letters and speeches demonstrates that Cicero was familiar with the more incisive functions of the device, he may not have conceived of such language as ironic. At any rate, Cicero seems to have regarded irony as other ancient authors did—as a localized rhetorical device, “not a sensibility or attitude.”¹¹³

Quintilian, on the other hand, distinguishes the Greek term εἰρωνεία from the Latin *dissimulatio*.¹¹⁴ He defines the former as a device in which the meaning “should be understood as contrary to that which is said” (*contrarium ei quod dicitur intelligendum est*).¹¹⁵ Unlike *dissimulatio*, εἰρωνεία is meant to convey, not conceal. The conflict between literal and assumed meaning is evident from the situation, the tone, hyperbole, or other cues—an early observation on how a speaker can signal ironic intentions.

¹⁰⁹ Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 9.

¹¹⁰ Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 9.

¹¹¹ Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, 35–39.

¹¹² Cicero, *De Oratore*, 2.269–275.

¹¹³ Colebrook, *Irony*, 5–6. This formulation changed with the rediscovery of Socrates during the Renaissance and pervades modern conceptions of irony.

¹¹⁴ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratorica*, 9.44.

¹¹⁵ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratorica*, 8.54.

This relative paucity of ancient sources that discuss the specific phenomenon of εἰρωνεία does not speak against the richness of irony in ancient literature. The survey of modern literary critics has demonstrated that a wide variety of other phenomena not mentioned by Cicero or Quintilian should also be considered ironic. As Muecke has observed, “the phenomenon [of irony] was responded to before it was named and consequently before there could have been a concept of it.”¹¹⁶ The student of irony, then, should not limit its study to works that contain the key terms associated with it—especially not in ancient contexts.

Greek Tragedy and Dramatic Irony

In fact, one may trace the roots of dramatic irony to the Greek playwrights, who were masters of this yet unnamed technique.¹¹⁷ The definition offered by M.H. Abrams adequately conveys the sense of this trope:

dramatic irony involves a situation in a play or narrative in which the audience shares with the author knowledge of which a character is ignorant: the character acts in a way grossly inappropriate to the actual circumstances or expects the opposite of what fate holds in store, or says something that anticipates the actual outcome, but not at all in the way he means it.¹¹⁸

In dramatic irony, the narrator or author functions as the ironist, the audience the observer, and the ignorant character the victim.¹¹⁹ Though modern readers were the first to apply the label of irony to Greek drama, elements recognizable as dramatic irony bear the unmistakable marks of a carefully crafted literary technique.

¹¹⁶ Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, 15.

¹¹⁷ Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, 15. Dramatic ironies were not called “ironies” until the nineteenth century. Colebrook, *Irony*, 10.

¹¹⁸ M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 80.

¹¹⁹ Pattison argues that because dramatic irony is about “knowledge-mismatches” between a character and the audience and does not necessarily involve opposition, it is not a true irony. Pattison, *Characterising Irony*, 180–85. However, in this work I am not concerned with evaluating dramatic irony’s status as a true irony, but only using it as an interpretive tool within the terms by which it has already been defined.

Consider an example each from Sophocles and Euripides. At the beginning of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus emphatically asserts his intent to punish Laius' murderer (224–54), unaware that he himself is the culprit. He goes so far as to claim that he will pursue the case “as if it were my own father's” (ὡσπερὲι τοῦμοῦ πατρός, 264). The richness of this irony and the tragic ignorance of Oedipus leads Charles Segal to observe, “Oedipus' words seem to speak a truth that he himself cannot (consciously) utter, as if his language is somehow out of his control: it wants to speak a truth that he does not fully know.”¹²⁰ In Euripides' *Bacchae*, Pentheus holds an extended (and hostile) interview with Dionysus about the cult of Dionysus—not realizing, as the audience does, that he is speaking to the god himself.¹²¹ In both cases, the audience is well aware of the true nature of things and the tragic significance of the characters' action.

In the case of the former, this awareness is the result of the common store of Greek mythology. Sophocles has not invented the story; he has only perfected its tragic portrayal. “Everyone in the theater knows what poor Oedipus does not... the irony plays off this prior knowledge without resorting to any explanatory devices in the play itself.”¹²² On the other hand, the audience of the *Bacchae* is privy to Dionysus' identity because the play begins with a cosmic prologue in which the god establishes the facts of the matter. Thus, Euripides has provided his audience with the necessary information that will allow them to appreciate the dramatic irony of the interaction between Pentheus and Dionysus. In this respect, the *Bacchae* serves as a model for the Fourth Gospel, which also introduces its god-in-disguise with an introduction that takes

¹²⁰ Charles Segal, *Sophocles' Tragic World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 162.

¹²¹ Euripides, *Bacchae*, 460–508.

¹²² Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 24.

place on a cosmic scale (1:1–18). Considering these verses, Jo-Ann Brant writes, “the prologue initiates the audience into the privileged realm of knowing that makes irony possible.”¹²³

This dramatic irony gives way to divine irony. Euripides seems to have had an acute sense for divine irony, ending four of his extant plays (*Bacchae*, *Helen*, *Andromache*, *Alcestis*) with these lines:¹²⁴

πολλὰ μορφαὶ τῶν δαιμονίων
 πολλὰ δ' ἀέλπτος κραινοῦσι θεοὶ
 καὶ τὰ δοκηθέντ' οὐκ ἐτελέσθη
 τῶν δ' ἀδοκῆτων πόρον ἦρε θεός
 τοιόνδ' ἀπέβη τόδε πρᾶγμα

Divine things take many forms
 And the gods bring many things to pass unexpectedly
 While the expected things remain unaccomplished
 God has found a way to achieve things unconsidered
 Thus has this matter turned out

As Holland notes, “the gods know things as they truly are, while human beings know things only as they appear to be.”¹²⁵ Greek tragedy reflects the ancient assumption that mortals are ultimately incapable of understanding the divine will and purposes.

Though it is perhaps overused, it is important to also consider Aristotle’s commentary on the nature of tragic plots. In his mind, a “complex” (πεπλεγμένοι) plot requires περιπέτεια, ἀναγνώρισις, or both.¹²⁶ Περιπέτεια, simply described, is a change to the opposite: ἔστι δὲ περιπέτεια μὲν ἢ εἰς τὸ ἐναντίον τῶν πραττομένων μεταβολή.¹²⁷ Depending upon how one reads πραττομένων, this may either refer to the character’s actions (a subjective reading) or to the

¹²³ Jo-Ann Brant, *Dialogue and Drama: Elements of Greek Tragedy in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 17.

¹²⁴ A fifth, *Medea*, ends with a slight variation.

¹²⁵ Holland, *Divine Irony*, 62.

¹²⁶ Aristotle, *Poetica*, 1452a 15–18.

¹²⁷ Aristotle, *Poetica*, 1452a 22–25.

reversal of fortune that results from these actions (an objective reading).¹²⁸ I find that the subjective reading yields a richer irony and more profound tragic effect—there is nothing inherently ironic about a reversal of fortune unless it occurs in striking opposition (recall Muecke’s criteria) to expectations. There is also no room for the important element of ἀμαρτία if the reversal is unconnected to the character’s actions. We might describe περιπέτεια as situational irony, and when the audience is aware of the character’s error (ἀμαρτία), it becomes a form of dramatic irony.¹²⁹ The ἀναγνώρισις is the “change from ignorance to knowledge” when the character finally realizes the error.¹³⁰ At this moment, the ironic tension is released and the tragic potential is realized.

Aristotle also makes the case that the best tragedies tell the story of a morally ambiguous character who falls due to an error in judgment. Plots that tell of a good man falling from happiness to misery or a bad man rising from misery to happiness are unsatisfying, while the story of a very bad man falling from happiness to misery will fail to produce the two most important effects of tragedy: pity and fear. The audience will not pity a depraved villain; nor will they see themselves in him and fear their own downfall. A morally complex protagonist, on the other hand, allows the plot to explore the limits of human knowledge and agency while still providing a plausible and satisfying conclusion.¹³¹

The conventions of Greek tragedy, including dramatic irony and Aristotle’s plot elements, are particularly relevant for the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel. Affinities between

¹²⁸ Bernd Seidensticker discusses both possibilities. Bernd Seidensticker, “*Peripeteia* and Tragic Dialectic in Euripidean Tragedy,” in *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond*, ed. M.S. Silk (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 377–80.

¹²⁹ Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, 15. Muecke additionally argues that all observable irony is, by nature, theatrical. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, 69

¹³⁰ Aristotle, *Poetica*, 1452a 31.

¹³¹ Aristotle, *Poetica*, 1452b 30–1453a 17.

the text and ancient drama have long been noted,¹³² but the most thorough examination of these similarities comes in Jo-Ann Brant's *Dialogue and Drama*. Brant makes a compelling case that "the gospel writer made use of the conventions of the Greek tragedies," examining such features as plot, speech, characterization, and the role of the narrator.¹³³ Given the strong case that Brant makes, exploring the conventions of tragedy as a possible framework for Johannine irony requires no further warrant.¹³⁴

Johannine Irony

Finally, a brief note must be made about the study of irony in the Fourth Gospel. Commentators on John have long made passing reference to ironies, but the formal study of Johannine irony emerged in the 1970s and 80s. Paul Duke offers a sweeping examination of irony across the Gospel (1985), but does not implement any sort of distinct methodology in this task.¹³⁵ Admitting the inherent difficulty of defining irony, he defaults to the observation of Muecke that irony generally consists of three parts: two layers, opposition between these layers, and an unawareness of the duality by one of the parties involved.¹³⁶ Duke recognizes the limitations of his approach—a broad survey of different types of irony across the Gospel—and thus does not perform a sustained close reading outside of two brief case studies.¹³⁷ In a work published the next year (1986), Gail O'Day, building on the work of previous scholars such as G. W. Macrae, explores the theological motivations for Johannine irony, operating under the

¹³² See, for example, D. Butler Pratt, "The Gospel of John from the Standpoint of Greek Tragedy," *The Biblical World* 30.6 (1907): 448–59.

¹³³ Brant, *Dialogue and Drama*, 12.

¹³⁴ One may also consider Dennis MacDonald, *The Dionysian Gospel: The Fourth Gospel and Euripides* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017). MacDonald makes the case that the Fourth Evangelist reworked Gospel tradition with reference to Dionysus mythology found in Greek tragedy. One need not accept his entire argument to recognize the profound influence that the Greek tragic tradition may have had on the composition of the Fourth Gospel.

¹³⁵ Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*.

¹³⁶ Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 13; citing Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, 14.

¹³⁷ Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 117–38. Neither of these case studies touches on John 11:47–51, though he does discuss the Caiaphas pericope in some detail in a section on "Unconscious Prophecy and Testimony," 86–89.

working definition that irony is a “specific rhetorical figure... in which two contradictory or conflicting meanings are held together in one image or expression.”¹³⁸ O’Day concludes that Johannine irony functions like a process of revelation, where, in a Kierkegaardian way, old conceptions of reality are “displaced” by the new.¹³⁹ J. E. Botha, in a series of articles (1991), criticizes the inadequacy of previous studies.¹⁴⁰ These studies, Botha claims, have failed to introduce innovative methodologies and were ultimately derivative of one another. Admitting that “defining irony is not a simple matter,” Botha prefers to describe rather than define and suggests the incorporation of recent advances in critical theory, such as Speech-Act theory.¹⁴¹ This call is picked up by Hisayasu Ito (2000), who offers a framework for applying Speech-Act as well as a step-by-step application of it to John 9.¹⁴² Like Botha, Ito chooses to describe ironies on a situational basis rather than providing an all-encompassing definition of irony.

Meanwhile, Alan Culpepper, one of the pioneers in the field of Johannine irony, offers a survey of Johannine irony and its interpretations (1996).¹⁴³ Observing that “the course of scholarship on Johannine irony has followed the general course of critical theory,” he embraces the introduction of strict methodology into the discipline, all the while arguing for the stability of

¹³⁸ Gail O’Day, “Narrative Mode and Theological Claim: A Study in the Fourth Gospel,” *JBL* 105.4 (1986): 657–68, here 663.

¹³⁹ O’Day, Narrative Mode and Theological Claim,” 668. O’Day’s conception of irony, because of its stability, has constructive capabilities. Since Kierkegaard’s vision of irony is limited to the unstable variety, it can only be deconstructive.

¹⁴⁰ J. E. Botha, “The Case of Johannine Irony Reopened I: The Problematic Current Situation,” *Neotestamentica* 25.2 (1991): 209–20; “The Case of Johannine Irony Reopened II: Suggestions, Alternative Approaches,” *Neotestamentica* 25.2 (1991): 221–32.

¹⁴¹ Botha, “The Case of Johannine Irony Reopened I,” 310. Defined briefly, Speech-Act theory posits that a verbal exchange—a “speech act”—may itself consist of several innate actions (beyond the simple conveyance of information): the utterance act (the actual act of saying something), the locutionary act (saying something with meaning), the perlocutionary act (the goal or outcome desired by the speech), and the illocutionary act (the attitude, intention, or force behind the statement). These different acts are used to analyze the means and methods of human communication. See Kent Bach and Robert M. Harnish, *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979), 4–8.

¹⁴² Hisayasu Ito, “Johannine Irony Demonstrated in John 9: Part I,” *Neotestamentica* 34.2 (2000): 361–71; “Johannine Irony Demonstrated in John 9: Part II,” *Neotestamentica* 34.2 (2000): 373–87.

¹⁴³ R. Alan Culpepper, “Reading Johannine Irony,” in *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith*, ed. by R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 193–208.

the Gospel's irony (in this case, the idea that the narrator is a reliable source of information who does not try to mislead his reader).¹⁴⁴ In opposition, Stephen Moore (1989)¹⁴⁵ and Tom Thatcher (1999)¹⁴⁶ make the case that Johannine irony is radically unstable and turns on the audience¹⁴⁷ as often as its characters. Frank England (2014) returns to that wellspring of Johannine irony, John 9, and argues that "irony is the resolution of ensuing conflict," wherein paradox resolves dual meaning.¹⁴⁸ In a recent dissertation (2019), Tat Lee attempts to ground John's irony within irony as understood in its ancient context.¹⁴⁹ To do this, he draws particularly on Greek tragedy and its tropes as described in Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Collectively, this research provides important observations about Johannine irony generally, as well as targeted treatments of particularly important passages. However, the authors who have produced general surveys of Johannine irony, such as Duke and Culpepper, have not, by the nature of their work, been able to move beyond broad definitions nor employ any specificity in their use of technical terms. Despite their comprehensive nature and robust scholarship, this renders them mostly unsuitable as models for the close reading of individual passages. Other works, such as those of O'Day, Moore, Thatcher, Botha, and Lee, focus primarily on a single element of Johannine irony. These are valuable tools, relevant and useful for the task of close reading. Finally, there are the studies of England and Ito, which both focus on a single passage, John 9. While they focus on a different part of the text and rely on different methodologies than does the present study, England and Ito demonstrate possible ways forward

¹⁴⁴ Culpepper, "Reading Johannine Irony," 201.

¹⁴⁵ Stephen Moore, "Rifts in (a Reading of) the Fourth Gospel, or Does Johannine Irony Still Collapse in a Reading that Draws Attention to Itself?" *Neotestamentica* 23.1 (1989): 5–17.

¹⁴⁶ Tom Thatcher, "The Sabbath Trick: Unstable Irony in the Fourth Gospel," *JSNT* 76 (1999): 53–77.

¹⁴⁷ In this work, I use "audience" and "reader" more or less synonymously.

¹⁴⁸ Frank England, "Credo ut Intelligam: Irony in John 9," *Neotestamentica* 48.2 (2014): 365–85, here 365.

¹⁴⁹ Tat Yan Lee, "'Dramatic Irony' in John's Gospel? Re-Examining the Irony Using Ancient Dramatic Theory," unpublished dissertation, University of Aberdeen, 2019.

by incorporating general scholarship as well as specific theoretical frameworks to provide a close analysis of a passage. None of the authors cited above, however, has given special attention to John 11.

Making Sense of Irony: Some Preliminary Conclusions

After this (quite lengthy) survey, it will be valuable to distill the findings of these scholars and make note of their most salient points before applying them to the text in the next chapter. Muecke's description of irony as 1) double-layered, 2) involving some sort of opposition, and 3) a sense of unawareness about the contradiction (real or pretended) remains one of the most widely accepted and generally applicable characterizations in the field. I will use this characterization as my standard for identifying irony. However, to move forward and analyze *how* the irony of 11:45–53 functions, I will also apply the theorists' conclusions about the forms, functions, characteristics, and purposes of irony.

Since irony requires some measure of cooperation or mutual recognition between the ironist and observer, the ironist may use signals to indicate the true intentions of the ironic speech. Signals such as overstatement (hyperbole) or understatement (litotes) demonstrate that the words are not to be taken at face value. This can also be made obvious through the requirements of a specific speaking situation. If the meaning of a speaker's words appears directly and deliberately contrary to that which is dictated by the speaking situation, one may assume that the speaker has ironic intentions.

Kierkegaard sees irony as purely destructive force.¹⁵⁰ Booth nuances this perspective—unstable, infinite irony renders all meaning insecure. But localized, stable irony can actually be constructive, since it actually invites the observer to search for a level of deeper meaning—a

¹⁵⁰ This is not a negative value judgment. Such a destructive force is needed to tear down faulty and outdated paradigms. It cannot, however, rebuild or replace them. Kierkegaard, "The Concept of Irony," 28.

meaning that, when arrived at, is not challenged further. Stable irony does not insist on the destruction of meaning—only that meaning may not be what it appears to be initially.

Gibbons and Muecke both point to the corrective power of irony. This is an important function (perhaps *the* most important) of the irony in the Caiaphas pericope. In fact, Muecke sees correction as the most basic function of simple ironies. In these corrective situations, the εἶρων corrects the ἀλαζών, who has opened the room for an ironic twist through inappropriate overconfidence. Yet another function of irony is exclusion—drawing a sharp divide between the observer in the realm of privileged understanding and the victim, who is hopelessly ignorant of the meaning of things.

Holland has demonstrated that divine communication was understood to have multifaceted levels of meaning. Only one in a position of privileged knowledge—a god or one to whom the gods have granted their divine insight—can securely interpret oracular speech or portents. If the audience is privy to the divine perspective, the tension between things understood (incorrectly) by mortals and (correctly) by gods produces a sort of dramatic irony. A recurring theme in tragedy is that mortals cannot hope to understand divine purposes and that actions (περιπέτεια) taken in the confident assumption that one has a true grasp on the state of affairs will ultimately lead to ruin. Aristotle argues that the most effective tragic character is one who thus falls not through some moral deficiency but through a fatal error (ἁμαρτία).

Finally, several important insights can be gleaned from the history of the study of irony in the Fourth Gospel. After the broad work of several pioneers in the field, it became increasingly evident that some set of standard methodological criteria was necessary. The work of Botha and Ito on Speech-Act theory represents an effort to incorporate tools of study from an adjacent field, with its associated methodological standards. This study, too, aims to bring a defined

methodology to the evaluation of an ironic episode. In the next chapter, I will synthesize these observations from ironologists with my close reading of John 11:45–53.

CHAPTER FOUR: ISN'T IT IRONIC?

This chapter will evaluate John 11:45–53 against the theories of irony established previously. First, by applying Muecke’s three criteria for identifying irony (double-layering, opposition, and unawareness), I confirm that Caiaphas’ speech does indeed qualify as ironic. Next, I describe the irony of 11:45–53 (both in terms of form and function) by comparing its characteristics to elements of ironies that have been categorized by theorists. This sets the stage for a final close reading of the passage, where I note the many threads of irony running through the pericope and how they affect the interpretation of the text. I conclude this study by exploring the Evangelist’s theological motivations for using irony as a literary and didactic tool.

Checking the Boxes: Caiaphas’ Prophecy as Ironic Speech

It is clear that the speech of Caiaphas fits Muecke’s generally accepted, threefold characterization of irony. First, his words, “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,” are clearly *double-layered*. Given the theological context, we may recall Holland’s observation that inspired speech was thought to contain divine irony by concealing the gods’ true intentions underneath a “literal or surface meaning.”¹⁵¹ Caiaphas’ speech likewise contains two levels of meaning. On a surface level, it is pragmatic advice suggesting that executing the troublemaker Jesus will forestall a potential Roman reprisal. On a deeper level, it is an unwitting prophecy of the salvific effects of Jesus’ death.

Next, there must be *opposition* between these layers. Examining the two levels listed above, one might argue that they are not mutually exclusive—perhaps Jesus’ death could both

¹⁵¹ Holland, *Divine Irony*, 68.

placate the Romans and offer salvation from sin and death. But D.A. Carson defines the opposition: “Both Caiaphas and John understand Jesus’ death to be substitutionary: either Jesus dies or the nation dies... but while Caiaphas is thinking at the purely political level, John invites his readers to think in terms of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”¹⁵² At the very least, the former meaning is totally subsumed and even irrelevant in the face of the latter. Historical hindsight (from a certain early Christian perspective) draws the opposition along even clearer lines: “It seems probable that [the Evangelist] also joined other early interpreters in viewing the subjugation of Israel and the destruction of the temple as direct consequences of Jewish rejection of Jesus.”¹⁵³ This turn of events additionally represents a tragic *περιπέτεια*, as I will discuss further below.

The opposition also functions on another level. The situation juxtaposes Caiaphas’ assumed knowledge with his demonstrated ignorance. This claim to knowledge cannot be squared with his lack of understanding, which leads into Muecke’s third of criterion for irony, an element of *unawareness*. Caiaphas’ overconfident dismissal, “You know nothing at all! You do not understand...” paints him as a true *ἀλαζών* and an easy target for the ironist’s subversion. As Muecke observes, “simple ignorance is safe from irony, but ignorance compounded with the least degree of confidence counts as intellectual hubris and is a punishable offense.”¹⁵⁴ The ignorance is heightened and the irony deepened by the assumption that, as high priest, Caiaphas certainly should know better. Muecke cites “high contrast” as a feature of rich ironies¹⁵⁵ and this recalls Gibbons’ observation: “the true ground of an Irony [is] the power of contrast... the

¹⁵² D.A. Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 422.

¹⁵³ Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 87.

¹⁵⁴ Muecke, *Compass of Irony*, 30.

¹⁵⁵ Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, 54.

plumes of the raven never appear with so deep a jet, as when he is walking over a track of unsullied snow.”¹⁵⁶

Which Characteristics of Irony are Present?

Having established that the pericope fits these basic characteristics of irony, we can now examine some of the irony’s functions. Gibbons and Muecke both point to irony’s corrective power. Here, the Evangelist corrects not Caiaphas’ words, but their interpretation. He forestalls the idea that Jesus’s death was the result of a tragic failure to escape his enemies’ power. By making Caiaphas’ words of counsel an unconscious prophecy, the Evangelist has made it clear that Jesus’s death, though planned by his enemies, was a part of the divine plan.¹⁵⁷

In the previous chapter, I quoted Muecke’s observation: “to ironize something is to place it... in whatever context will invalidate it or correct it.”¹⁵⁸ As Kaufer has noted, ironies are often signaled by a disconnection between the words’ apparent meaning and the meaning dictated by the context (or speaking situation). In an interesting twist, Caiaphas’ surface-level meaning makes perfect sense in its immediate context (a meeting of the Sanhedrin with the intent to put a stop to Jesus’s public ministry), but the Evangelist has inserted to this story into a larger narrative that entirely invalidates the surface-level reading of Caiaphas’ words. The reader, primed by the Gospel’s prologue to expect more of Jesus than most of its characters do, understands that Jesus’s death will have far-reaching consequences beyond those which Caiaphas anticipates.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Gibbons, *Rhetoric*, 9. Capitalization original.

¹⁵⁷ Köstenberger, *John*, 352.

¹⁵⁸ Muecke, *Compass of Irony*, 23.

¹⁵⁹ “Without [the prologue] the audience of the gospel would enter the action without orientation and be left to respond to Jesus’ signs and assertions with the same bewilderment shown by characters within the gospel.” Brant, *Dialogue and Drama*, 18.

Hyperbole and overstatement (“extravagance,” as Gibbons puts it) are also effective signals to the reader that what is said should be considered ironic.¹⁶⁰ I discussed Caiaphas’ overconfidence above as an indicator of the necessary element of unawareness in irony, but here it also serves as an important signal of ironic intention on the Evangelist’s part:

The ignorance for which the high priest berates [the Sanhedrin] is the very ignorance in which he will excel them. With marvelous alazonry he shouts an emphatic *you*, then piles on three negatives and two verbs: by no means do *they* know, nor do they understand. Such swaggering effectively signals the reader that what follows will undo the speaker and exalt his intended victim.¹⁶¹

In effect, Caiaphas’ staggering overconfidence and condescension build up such a great store of ironic potential energy that the audience cannot help but anticipate its release.¹⁶²

Considering the ongoing debate over the stability of Johannine irony, it is important to establish that the irony of 11:45–53 is stable. For Booth, stable irony is intended, covert, stable, and finite. To the extent that authorial intent can be established, the pericope’s irony appears intentional; by imposing an authoritative alternate interpretation, it does not invite deeper overhauls of meaning beyond the initial subversion; and this subversive effect is limited to the immediate context. Thus, it is intended, stable, and finite. However, it is not covert since the Evangelist interrupts the narrative to make the irony explicit or overt.

Overt ironies “require no special act of reconstitution,” and so do not invite further exploration.¹⁶³ They are thus vulnerable if the observer decides he is unsatisfied with the author’s own ironic interpretation and searches for his own ironic twist, as this (uninvited) search may

¹⁶⁰ Gibbons, *Rhetoric*, 77.

¹⁶¹ Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 87–88.

¹⁶² This overconfidence, combined with the audience’s understanding, also strengthens the force of the *dramatic* irony, which, according to Muecke, “appears whenever the audience sees a character confidently unaware of his ignorance.” Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, 81.

¹⁶³ Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*, 236.

collapse the stability of the intended irony.¹⁶⁴ But since the Evangelist presents his writing as authoritative and does not seem to be writing to a hostile audience, this approach is not likely to be adopted by most readers of the Fourth Gospel. Here, irony's exclusionary power may also play a role in preserving the stability. Only the privileged insider is invited to view the episode through the Evangelist's ironic lens.¹⁶⁵ The Evangelist's believing audience is not likely to repeat Caiaphas' mistake. Thus, the irony's stability is preserved.

Recalling Muecke's characterization of irony into four categories, I find that the irony is *satiric*.¹⁶⁶ This means that the ironist (the Evangelist) has a negative attitude towards the victim (Caiaphas), the victim has an unfavorable fate, and that reality is assumed to reflect the ironist's values. While these three variables are not explicit in the Gospel, its reader can adduce them from the narrative. The Fourth Evangelist does not offer any sort of value judgment on Caiaphas or the Sanhedrin. However, he can hardly have a positive opinion of the instigator of Jesus's death. Similarly, he does not mention the fate of Caiaphas. The Fourth Gospel is not a story about Caiaphas; he is a tool in the plot. When he has fulfilled his function, he drops out of the narrative—never mentioned, alluded to, nor thought of again. But, assuming a post-70 CE date of composition, the Gospel's audience would have been well aware of the fiery destruction of the temple institution.¹⁶⁷ The nature of reality, on the other hand, is an extremely important concern for the Evangelist. His purpose is to show how the incarnation of Jesus has fundamentally

¹⁶⁴ Booth, *Rhetoric Irony*, 240.

¹⁶⁵ A hostile outsider would, in theory, find the irony inaccessible and not be in a position to undermine the subversion.

¹⁶⁶ Satire, while a complex genre in its own right, has many elements in common with irony (such as the involvement of an ironist/satirist, observer, and victim, multi-faceted levels of meaning, and "emphasis through negation").

¹⁶⁷ For a thorough argument in favor of a post-70 dating for the Fourth Gospel (based on the Evangelist's presumed awareness of the temple's destruction), see Alan Kerr, *The Temple of Jesus' Body: The Temple Theme in the Fourth Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 19–25.

transformed reality. Reality is on the side of the one through whom all things came into being (John 1:3).

The satirical nature of this episode is clear. Here is a high priest, the ostensible mouthpiece and representative of God, and yet he cannot even understand his own inspired words. There is clearly no love lost between the Evangelist and the high priest, yet the Evangelist does at least reserve some respect for the office, noting that Caiaphas' prophecy came by virtue of his office, not his personal merits. Raymond Brown notes, "We can see that such an unconscious prophecy on the lips of a Jewish high priest would make an effective argument in the Jewish-Christian circles to whom (in part) the Fourth Gospel was addressed."¹⁶⁸ Perhaps this reflects a desire, however faint, for some degree of legitimization through the authoritative channels of Jerusalem-based Judaism.

If we are to understand Aristotle's περιπέτεια as a reversal of fortune wherein actions taken bring about the opposite of their intended result (taking πραττομένων subjectively), the application to the Caiaphas pericope is clear: "In the author's view it is precisely in killing Jesus that they achieve the death of their nation and their temple. In a tragic irony of events, they die the death they intend for Jesus."¹⁶⁹ Caiaphas' counsel leads to the tragic result that it is calculated to avoid.

Though the New Testament meaning of ἁμαρτία is far removed from Aristotle's "tragic error," it is still significant that Jesus refers to the Sanhedrin's decision as such: "the one who handed me over to you [Pilate] is guilty of a greater sin [ἁμαρτίαν]" (John 19:11). Whatever trace of classical connotation remained in ἁμαρτία in the Koine of the Fourth Gospel may point the reader to the tragic significance of Caiaphas' decision.

¹⁶⁸ Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 442.

¹⁶⁹ Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 113.

These elements also affect how we should understand the figure of Caiaphas. What sort of a character is he? While not a major character in the Fourth Gospel, it is intriguing that he is characterized in ways similar to that of a tragic protagonist. We can return to Aristotle's observation that the best and most effective (at producing a satisfying plot and the desired effect in the audience) tragic character is "not distinguished in virtue or righteousness" and yet does not fall into misfortune "due to evil or wickedness" but instead "due to some error."¹⁷⁰ If we can extend this characterization to Caiaphas, then it becomes apparent that, in the eyes of the Evangelist, the high priest may not have been evil or corrupt—he was just wrong. Smith writes, "to the Jewish authorities John ascribes a motive that is not dishonorable or malicious; at worst it may be prudential and self-serving."¹⁷¹ This "at worst" reasoning assumes pragmatic political motivations for the high priest's words and actions. At best, one can read Caiaphas as acting out of genuine concern for his nation's safety and as a Torah-observant leader following the injunctions of Deuteronomy 13.¹⁷² In an age of many would-be messiahs, cautious skepticism was not a vice.

My goal in this study cannot be to redeem the much-maligned figure of Caiaphas; after all, this would involve moral judgments that extend far beyond the scope of academic inquiry. However, this appreciation of his role as a tragic character certainly can nuance the "caricature" to which the high priest has so often been reduced by popular imagination.¹⁷³ It is not reasonable, useful, or correct to read Caiaphas as the unqualified villain of Christian tradition. Like so many of the Fourth Gospel's characters, Caiaphas is a complex figure who navigates the difficulties

¹⁷⁰ The full line is ἔστι δὲ τοιοῦτος ὁ μῆτε ἀρετῇ διαφέρων καὶ δικαιοσύνη μῆτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μοχθηρίαν μεταβάλλον εἰς τὴν δυστυχίαν ἀλλὰ δι' ἁμαρτίαν τινά. Aristotle, *Poetica*, 1453a 7–10.

¹⁷¹ Smith, *John*, 231.

¹⁷² Adele Reinhartz, "Caiaphas and Annas," in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmerman (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2016), 530–37.

¹⁷³ Bond, *Caiaphas*, 11.

presented by Jesus imperfectly. Pilate and Judas have both been defended, rehabilitated, or at least nuanced. The same courtesy should be extended to Caiaphas.¹⁷⁴

An Ironic Reading of 11:45–53

Here, I do not wish to reproduce the close reading that I produced in the second chapter. What follows is not so much a collection of exegetical notations, but rather some of observations about the ironic threads that run throughout the pericope, informed by the theory established in the previous chapter and applied at the beginning of this chapter. This analysis demonstrates that reading the passage through an ironic lens can provide new interpretive possibilities for the text. A proper understanding of the irony and theology of the pericope (which are inseparably connected here) sheds new light on Johannine themes that play an important role throughout the Gospel.

*And then many of the Jews who had come to Mary and had seen the things that Jesus did believed in him.
But others of them went to the Pharisees and told them the things Jesus had done.
11:45–46*

The possibility of a dual meaning is first hinted at in verses 45 and 46. There are two, mutually exclusive reactions to Jesus's miracle among his Jewish (or, better, Judaeen) observers: some believe in Jesus and others are alarmed, reporting him to the authorities. The first group seems to have recognized Jesus's spiritual power; the second sees him as a threat to the already-volatile political and social order. These two groups typify the polarized reaction to Jesus seen

¹⁷⁴ Reinhartz ends her book with the plea that her readers "remember Caiaphas kindly." Reinhartz, *Caiaphas*, 205. Bond speculates that few have emerged to vindicate Caiaphas because he has few ideological descendants. "We can admire Pilate's Rome, sympathize with Judas's humanity, but Caiaphas's cultic world is outside our comprehension." Moreover, despite the ongoing modern reclamation of the Pharisees (from the straw-men opponents of Jesus to the recognized moderates and ideological forbears of the rabbis), "the Sadducees have no modern successors with an interest in rehabilitating them." Bond, *Caiaphas*, 13.

throughout the Johannine Book of Signs. They are also representative of the two separate and opposed layers of meaning upon which the logic of Caiaphas' speech will operate.

This reaction to Jesus is twofold, not “double-layered.” The believers and unbelievers remain separate and distinct. But the two modes of thinking are brought together in the figure of Caiaphas. Though nominally an unbeliever, his office grants him insight beyond his personal capacity. Only here, where the distinct meanings are brought into an uneasy union that both heightens their similarities and sharpens their distinctions, can the layers align in a full blossoming of irony.

So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the Sanhedrin and said, “What are we doing about the fact that this man is performing many signs?”

11:47

Though many translations take the Sanhedrin's question τί ποιοῦμεν as a deliberative (“what should we do/what are we to do?”),¹⁷⁵ this takes strong and unfounded interpretive license with the Greek. Edwin A. Abbott notes that since the Fourth Evangelist uses the deliberative subjunctive elsewhere, this verse “must not be rendered ‘what must we do?’ since this would have been expressed by him in the usual way, by the subjunctive” (ποιοῦμεν vs. ποιῶμεν).¹⁷⁶ For this reason, I have translated the phrase with the literal, “what are we doing?”

There may be a note of irony in this. Though the council ought to be focused on their future action, they, like the observers in 11:45–46, are caught up in the moment. They are not deliberating about coming events; they are exasperatedly examining their own current state. Theirs also is an action taken in the heat of the moment, a reaction to Jesus's latest miraculous sign, rather than one truly calculated to avoid future disaster. This demonstrates that the decision to come is a referendum on their own panic more than it is about the threat posed by Jesus. The

¹⁷⁵ The important and influential NRSV, NLT, and ESV each treat it deliberatively.

¹⁷⁶ Edwin A. Abbott, *Johannine Grammar* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1906), 369.

council says one thing; it intends another, all the while unaware—Muecke’s three hallmarks of irony. One might call it a Freudian slip. In a moment of panic, they have altered a vowel.

“If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”

11:48

Though I have occupied most of this study explaining the irony of 11:50, the irony is no less rich (and tragic) here in 11:48. This assessment, in the Evangelist’s eyes, is simply wrong. The council fears that allowing Jesus to continue his ministry will result in universal belief and violent Roman reprisal. Both of these feared consequences will shortly come to pass, not because the Sanhedrin “let him go on like this,” but because they did *not*. Sophocles could not have composed a more tragic περιπέτεια.

There is an additional sense of dual meaning here given the Evangelist’s interplay between the person of Jesus and the temple institution. The connection between the two is explicit in 2:13–22 and present thematically throughout the Gospel. Here, especially, Alan Kerr observes, “the destruction of the Temple is linked with the death of Jesus.”¹⁷⁷ As Kerr argues, in the Fourth Gospel Jesus is the new temple, the point of convergence between Israel and its god. Thus, he pushes back against the idea that the Sanhedrin’s prediction is left incomplete (since they did *not* allow Jesus to “go on” but the Romans *still* carried out a violent intervention in Judaea). Rather, they accomplished their task in an ironic sense: by executing Jesus, they brought about his death and resurrection, which ensured the survival of the new “temple” even in the face of the Roman onslaught.¹⁷⁸ Thus, like Caiaphas’ prophecy in 11:50, the words of the Sanhedrin ring true in an ironic sense that they cannot understand nor intend.

But one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all!”

¹⁷⁷ Kerr, *Temple of Jesus’ Body*, 25.

¹⁷⁸ Kerr, *Temple of Jesus’ Body*, 24.

Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man die for the people and whole nation not be destroyed.”

11:49–50

Most of this study has been spent on the examination of these verses, so here I will note a few particulars that have escaped mention thus far. By first introducing Caiaphas as simply “one of them” and then as “high priest that year,” the Evangelist briefly subverts expectations and primes the pump for the deeper irony. Moreover, as I discussed earlier, the reference to “that year” may not reflect a misunderstanding of the length of the high priest’s tenure in office but instead a biting criticism of the high priesthood’s collaboration with Rome and the subsequent turnover in the office. F.B. Craddock writes,

In a beautiful stroke of sarcasm, the Evangelist calls Caiaphas ‘high priest that year’ (vv. 49, 51). In Jewish tradition the high priest was such for life, but now, under Rome, a breath could make or unmake a high priest. Those who sit so uneasily place political expediency above the word of God. He was not God’s man; he was not even his own man; he was Rome’s man.¹⁷⁹

This is a biting, sarcastic, ironic criticism indeed. Though Caiaphas lasted eighteen years in office—far longer than his contemporaries—his position was never less precarious than any of them. As I will discuss below, this is not the only element in this passage that undermines Caiaphas’ position as high priest.

The sense of political expediency suggested by συμφέρω (“it is better”) reminds one of Pilate’s cynical question, “What is truth?” (18:38), ironically uttered in the presence of the one who had so recently proclaimed, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6). The cynical logic of this-worldly authority does not fare well in the presence of John’s incarnate Λόγος.

The Evangelist additionally plays with the ambiguity in the preposition ὑπέρ. “Caiaphas probably intends the general sense, ‘instead of’; we are to hear its deeper sense, ‘for the sake

¹⁷⁹ Craddock, *John*, 89.

of.”¹⁸⁰ Caiaphas’ intended “instead of” is no substitutionary atonement. This is not the noble sacrifice of a righteous man for his people. As far as the high priest is concerned, Jesus is a troublemaker. Either he must go or the nation must. But the semantic slippage between “instead of/as a replacement for” and “instead of/for the sake of” allows his words to ring true in a deeper sense. In the Evangelist’s eyes, Caiaphas has his scriptural precedents wrong: Jesus is not Sheba (2 Sam 20:1–22); he is Eleazar, or one of his fellow martyrs, whose deaths became a “ransom for the sin of the nation” (ἀντίψυχον... τῆς τοῦ ἔθνους ἀμαρτίας, 4 Macc 17:21–22; cf. 6:27–29). Jesus is more innocent than Caiaphas presumes, his atonement is efficacious in a sense that even the high priest cannot comprehend. This likely plays into the Johannine (and broader early Christian) presentation of Jesus as the *true* high priest.¹⁸¹

He did not say this of his own volition, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, And not only for the nation, but also to gather the scattered children of God into one. And so from that day on they planned to kill him.
11:51–53

The Evangelist’s remark that Caiaphas did not speak “of his own volition” (ἄφ’ ἑαυτοῦ) manages to separate the speaker from the speech. Earlier, I compared Caiaphas’s error to that of Croesus. But unlike Croesus, who misunderstands the inspired speech of an oracle, Caiaphas misunderstands his *own* inspired speech. It requires a perceptive third party, functioning as the ironist, to understand and reveal the prophecy’s true meaning.¹⁸² As I have mentioned above, the Evangelist’s interpolation to explain Caiaphas’s prophecy is uncharacteristic of both his style and

¹⁸⁰ Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 88.

¹⁸¹ Jesus performs an efficacious atonement (the primary responsibility of the high priest), while in this passage Caiaphas is ironically unaware of the mechanism of atonement. John Paul Heil, “Jesus as the Unique High Priest in the Gospel of John,” *CBQ* 57.4 (1995): 731–35. Still, the supercessionism of this portrayal must be tempered (see the discussion below).

¹⁸² Again, this cuts against the high priest’s supposed divinatory prerogatives and privileged access to divine knowledge, suggesting that Jesus, as true high priest, instead offers the key to the true meaning of things.

of irony. Duke mentions that it “probably weakens the force of the irony,”¹⁸³ and this is because, counterintuitively, “overt” ironies are more prone to destabilization.¹⁸⁴ But the Evangelist is no literary critic; he is a theologian. Potential damage to the irony aside, he simply cannot leave one of the story’s most powerful theological premises unstated.

The Sanhedrin’s concern is for the “nation” (ἔθνος). By implication, this must mean the Jewish nation. Caiaphas, by contrast, speaks of the “people” (λαός). The Evangelist parses this shift into a distinction between Jesus’s salvific efforts for both the “nation” and for the “scattered children of God.” Here, the irony of dual meaning must be tempered. One might be tempted to read this passage through a supercessionist lens, seeing the Evangelist’s “nation” as the fledgling church, a replacement of the old Israel. But the distinction between the “nation” and the “scattered children of God” rather suggests that the latter is the Gentile church, leaving the identification as literal Israel to the former. Though there may be a streak of biting irony in the word ἔθνος, as it is normally the term for pagan nations,¹⁸⁵ nonetheless the Evangelist is adamant that Jesus’s sacrifice is efficacious for both the believing church and larger Israel. The irony stings, but Israel remains redeemed.¹⁸⁶

Herein lies the true nature of the Gospel’s divine irony. God is both the architect of the irony and the unexpected salvation wrought by Jesus. Duke writes,

All these hints and foreshadowings and testimonies and prophecies we have heard streaming off the lips of everyone who comes up against Jesus are neither accidental nor trivially entertaining. The intrusion in verse 51 helps the reader sense that each unwitting word has been a well-orchestrated note in a divinely directed symphony. The author has broken the silence to remind us that he himself is not the Ironist.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ Paul Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 88.

¹⁸⁴ Booth, *Rhetoric Irony*, 240.

¹⁸⁵ Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 88.

¹⁸⁶ Consider this in the theological light of Paul’s argument for Israel’s universal salvation, even in the face of unbelief, in Romans 9–11.

¹⁸⁷ Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 89.

For Holland, the principle underlying “most ancient” religious systems, and the divine irony that grew out of it, was a presumed “hostility between the gods and humanity.”¹⁸⁸ But the Fourth Gospel presumes a different sort of relationship between the divine and human realms, one where “God loved the world in such a way that he sent his only son so that everyone who believes in him would not perish but have eternal life” (3:16). The opposition of John’s divine irony is not the result of “hostility,” but rather the failure of mortals to adequately grasp the design of a loving God. Thus, the Gospel uses tragic conventions (such as irony) to deconstruct them.¹⁸⁹ Tragedy is predicated on the precarious position of mortals caught in the grinding wheels of an unfeeling and unknowable divine will. But John asserts that God—and his loving nature—has been revealed in the person of Jesus and that the irony of divine purposes brings salvation.

Conclusion: Why Irony?

As the study of Johannine irony came into its own in the 1980s, Gail O’Day observed that while most of these studies explored the content and implication of irony in the Gospel, few of them engaged with the manner in which the irony was communicated and how it affected the reader. These questions deal less with the “what” of John’s irony and more with the “how” and “why.”¹⁹⁰ O’Day concludes that the Gospel’s irony mimics a process of revelation: “to follow irony, one must participate and engage creatively in the text... the fourth evangelist is able to recreate the revelation experience for the reader, engaging the reader in the text the same way

¹⁸⁸ Holland, *Divine Irony*, 61.

¹⁸⁹ Brant, *Dialogue and Drama*, 260–62.

¹⁹⁰ O’Day, “Narrative Mode and Theological Claim,” 657.

that Jesus engaged those whom he encountered.”¹⁹¹ Irony is the most effective medium for the Evangelist to communicate his message.

We now turn to the “why” of the irony in 11:45–53. What purpose does it serve? An overly simplistic explanation—that such a prophecy actually occurred and the irony was therefore inherent—is unsatisfactory. Beyond the historical difficulties of such an approach,¹⁹² we should recall Muecke’s observation, “irony... is not a quality inherent in any remark, event, or situation.”¹⁹³ For irony to exist, there must be an observer to interpret it as such. There must also be an ironist, whether it be the narrator, fate, or a god. Irony, then, is the Evangelist’s deliberate choice.

The duality between divine and human is a prominent feature in John—especially the contrast between divine and human knowledge. As irony is the result, and in some sense resolution, of tension,¹⁹⁴ it is natural and organic given the Gospel’s dichotomy between the this-worldly and the otherworldly. Duke observes, “two worlds have collided in the coming of Jesus, and the inevitable result is the clash of opposition called irony. Human ignorance clashes with divine omniscience.”¹⁹⁵ Mortal understanding is woefully inadequate in grasping the meaning of it all, and “the implied author wants the reader to see the essential irony that life comes through death, specifically Jesus’ death.”¹⁹⁶ This tension between the two levels of understanding and meaning is resolved through irony, which “allows for contradictory ideas to coexist.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹¹ O’Day, *Narrative Mode and Theological Claim*,” 668.

¹⁹² The first and foremost of these difficulties being this: if the meeting of the Sanhedrin really did proceed along these lines and Caiaphas really did utter these words, how could the Evangelist have known? Keener’s suggestion that the Evangelist’s source was Joseph of Arimathea, who would have presumably been present for this session, is creative but quite speculative. Keener, *Gospel of John*, 2:852.

¹⁹³ Muecke, *Compass of Irony*, 14.

¹⁹⁴ Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 13. See also Renegar and Goehring, “Defense of Irony,” 315–16.

¹⁹⁵ Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 111.

¹⁹⁶ Culpepper, “Reading Johannine Irony,” 204–05.

¹⁹⁷ Renegar and Goehring, “Defense of Irony,” 316.

For Bultmann, the Johannine notion of Jesus, the δόξα of God veiled in σάρξ (the “glory” and the “flesh”), is “the paradox that runs through the entire Gospel.”¹⁹⁸ Paradox is perhaps the greatest theme of the Fourth Gospel, always typified in the person of Jesus—the Messiah who does not aspire to kingly power, who conceals his identity while revealing it, and here, who dies to bring life to his people. As Gail O’Day has argued, the incarnational paradox of Jesus is the key to making sense out the meaning of the Fourth Gospel; it is the work’s “shaping literary and theological principle.”¹⁹⁹ Just as, in Bultmann’s eyes, neither the δόξα nor the σάρξ can be separated from each other,²⁰⁰ nor can the saving power of Jesus function without his death. Caiaphas cannot fathom how Jesus’s death can serve any purpose other than removing a potential troublemaker from the scene. But the Evangelist’s sense for the divine program has transformed the high priest’s practical solution into a triumphant testimony of Jesus’s life-giving death.

¹⁹⁸ “Die Paradoxie, die das ganze Evg durchzieht.” Bultmann, *Johannesevangelium*, 41. My translation.

¹⁹⁹ Gail O’Day, “The Gospel of John: Reading the Incarnate Words,” in *Jesus in Johannine Tradition*, ed. Robert T. Fortna and Tom Thatcher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 32.

²⁰⁰ Bultmann, *Johannesevangelium*, 41.

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