

General Comments on John 11-12

This chapter is the pinnacle of Johannine irony. John presents the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead as the ultimate cause of Jesus' death. The Anchor Bible (AB) states:

The suggestion that the supreme miracle of giving life to man leads to the death of Jesus offers a dramatic paradox worthy of summing up Jesus' career.

The raising of Lazarus is the only specific literal fulfilment of a NT parable, cf. Luke 16. While there are some important similarities between this event and the parable, there are also some notable differences. We should be cautious not to overemphasize the connections between the parable and the literal event so as to avoid reading too much into the parable by way of speculation.

In dealing with the subject of the text, verses 11:45 through 12:11 are best taken together. The KJV division between ch. 11 and 12 is because of the change in time and location, but the subject is same, cp. 11:14-46 with 12:9-11. The real shift in subject comes in 12:12 as 12:12-50 serve to contrast the fleeting adulation of the multitude with the glory of the Father.

Comments on John 11

1 NOW a certain [man] was sick, [named] Lazarus, of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. **2** (It was [that] Mary which anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.) **3** Therefore his sisters sent unto him, saying, Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick. **4** When Jesus heard [that], he said, This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby. **5** Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. **6** When he had heard therefore that he was sick, he abode two days still in the same place where he was.

v1-6 A beloved friend is deathly ill, so his sisters send word to Jesus in the hopes he will come and heal him (v. 1-3). Jesus indicates there is something much greater at work than just illness, and so he waits another two days for the greater work to come to fruition (v. 4-6).

v1 "Lazarus", the Hebrew version of this name is "Eleazar" and means "God helps" or "Helped of God".

"Mary...Martha", see Luke 10:38-42 for additional

interaction between Jesus and these two.

v2 This parenthetical comment makes reference to the anointing of 12:3.

v4 "this sickness is not unto death", while Jesus may be speaking figuratively of "death" and be saying "this [physical] sickness is not unto [spiritual] death" as he clearly is in v. 26, the statement can also be taken literally as Jesus revives Lazarus from physical death.

"that the son of God might be glorified thereby", the Anchor Bible (AB) states, "The restoration of physical life is a sign of eternal life. It will glorify God in that it will bring Jesus' death, which is part of the atonement."

v6 Jesus loiters because he wants to make it clear Lazarus really is dead. The Jewish tradition was the spirit lingers near the body for some three days after death. Waiting for the fourth day goes beyond any possibility of people thinking Jesus did not really raise him from the dead.

John Lightfoot (1602-1675) in A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica cites a Rabbinical source in commenting on this tradition:

The three days of weeping were now past, and the four days of lamentation begun: so that all hope and expectation of his coming to himself was wholly gone.

"They go to the sepulchres, and visit the dead for three days. Neither are they solicitous lest they should incur the reproach of the Amorites." The story is, They visited a certain person, and he revived again, and lived five-and-twenty years, and then died. They tell of another that lived again, and begot children, and then died.

"It is a tradition of Ben Kaphra's: The very height of mourning is not till the third day. For three days the spirit wanders about the sepulchre, expecting if it may return into the body. But when it sees that the form or aspect of the face is changed, then it hovers no more, but leaves the body to itself."

"They do not certify of the dead" [that this is the very man, and not another] 'but within the three days after his decease': for after three days his countenance is changed."

7 Then after that saith he to [his] disciples, Let us go into Judaea again. 8 [His] disciples say unto him, Master, the Jews of late sought to stone thee; and goest thou thither again? 9 Jesus

answered, Are there not twelve hours in the day? If any man walk in the day, he stumbleth not, because he seeth the light of this world. 10 But if a man walk in the night, he stumbleth, because there is no light in him.

11 These things said he: and after that he saith unto them, Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep. 12 Then said his disciples, Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well. 13 Howbeit Jesus spake of his death: but they thought that he had spoken of taking of rest in sleep. 14 Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead. 15 And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him. 16 Then said Thomas, which is called Didymus, unto his fellow-disciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him.

v7-16 After two days pass (v. 6) Jesus tells the disciples they are returning to Judea (v. 7), and the disciples question the move given the hostility towards him (v. 8). Jesus states those who seek to do him harm cannot succeed because they are blind (v. 9-10). He then tells the disciples they are going to visit Lazarus to wake him (v. 11). The disciples misunderstand him (v. 12-13), and he clarifies (v. 14) and tries to explain some greater work is to be done (v. 15). The disciples still don't really understand, and in a fatalistic mood follow him (v. 16).

v7-10 Jesus says they are going to travel back to Judea again (v. 7), and his disciples are surprised by this given the number of close calls Jesus has had there with attempted stoning (v. 8). Jesus' response is that those who walk in the day do not stumble (v. 9), but those who walk in the night stumble because they cannot see (v. 10).

Jesus is obviously making reference to doing good and doing evil. Those who do evil always ultimately fail in their efforts because their thoughts and desires are intrinsically corrupt. They are abandoned by God and left to their own arm of flesh machinations, and thus they stumble and fall, cp. Isa. 50:10-11. All of the assassination attempts previous to this have failed as Jesus has not permitted them to succeed. Now, the time has come, and he will permit them to succeed.

v9-10 Jesus is probably paraphrasing Jer. 13:16, which perhaps suggests John is drawing Jesus' weeping in v. 35 with Jer. 13:17.

v9 "the light of this world", cp. 8:12, 9:5.

v16 It was Thomas, the same labeled "doubting" (cf. 20:24-25), who clearly was the pessimist among the disciples.

It might be that some of them were grasping what Jesus was saying about his imminent death, but it is plain from 12:16 and

13:36 they were still not entirely clear on the impending events.

17 Then when Jesus came, he found that he had [lain] in the grave four days already. 18 Now Bethany was nigh unto Jerusalem, about fifteen furlongs off: 19 And many of the Jews came to Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother.

20 Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him: but Mary sat [still] in the house. 21 Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. 22 But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give [it] thee. 23 Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again. 24 Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day. 25 Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: 26 And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this? 27 She saith unto him, Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world.

28 And when she had so said, she went her way, and called Mary her sister secretly, saying, The Master is come, and calleth for thee. 29 As soon as she heard [that], she arose quickly, and came unto him. 30 Now Jesus was not yet come into the town, but was in that place where Martha met him. 31 The Jews then which were with her in the house, and comforted her, when they saw Mary, that she rose up hastily and went out, followed her, saying, She goeth unto the grave to weep there. 32 Then when Mary was come where Jesus was, and saw him, she fell down at his feet, saying unto him, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. 33 When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled, 34 And said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see. 35 Jesus wept. 36 Then said the Jews, Behold how he loved him! 37 And some of them said, Could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?

v17-37 Before raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus interacts with the two sisters first. Each of them has a very different reaction to Jesus' statements.

Jesus travels to Lazarus' home where many people are lamenting his death, now four days past (v. 17-19). Martha hears first of Jesus' arrival and goes out to meet him (v. 30), expressing faith in the ultimate outcome (v. 20-27). She then returns and sends Mary to him (v. 28-29), who is accompanied by mourners (v. 31), but she is overwhelmed by grief and expresses no hope (v. 32). Jesus is grieved by the scene and asks to be escorted to the tomb (v. 33-35). The equally hopeless mourners speculate over whether Jesus could have healed Lazarus had he been there in time (v. 36-37).

Martha first and then Mary come out to greet Jesus as he

approaches the house. In the previous account of these three (cf. Luke 10:38-42) Mary is presented as the more faithful one, but here Martha has greater faith. Martha approaches Jesus first and says that had Jesus been there he could have prevented Lazarus' death (v. 21), but even after his death she knows he can still raise him (v. 22). She also makes a powerful confession of faith (v. 24, 27). However, Mary only grieves over Jesus' absence, seemingly faulting him for not being there when they needed him (v. 32). Her complaint is awful and hopeless, so much so that it even grieves Jesus terribly (v. 33).

v17 As is the case with the two days in v. 6, the AB indicates this detail was included because there was a Rabbinic tradition that the spirit of a human lingered near the body for three days after death, and after three days there was no chance of resuscitation.

v18-19 These two verses inform the reader the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead occurred nearby Jerusalem and was witnessed by "many of the Jews". Hence the quick response by the Pharisees and Sanhedrin in v. 46-57.

v25-26 Verse 25 makes reference to the resurrection, or physical salvation. Verse 26 makes reference to eternal life, or spiritual salvation.

v33, 38 "he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled...again groaning in himself", the AB indicates these phrases are Semitisms which express the impact of the deep internal emotion.

v33 What is Jesus troubled about? It appears to be the lack of faith on the part of Mary in specific and the Jews in general. When Jesus is first confronted by Martha she confesses her faith over Jesus still being able to do something, and Jesus proceeds in his journey. But, he then encounters a grieving and hopeless Mary and the lamenting faithless Jews (v. 37), then he himself is grieved. But, they mistake what he is grieving over. They think he laments for the death of Lazarus (v. 36), when what he is really lamenting is their lack of faith and the misery it puts them in.

v37 Knowledge of Jesus' previous miracles was widely known, and everyone knew who he was.

38 Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it. 39 Jesus said, Take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been [dead] four days. 40 Jesus saith unto her, Said I not unto thee, that,

if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God? 41 Then they took away the stone [from the place] where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up [his] eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. 42 And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said [it], that they may believe that thou hast sent me. 43 And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. 44 And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go.

v38-44 They approach the tomb and Martha misinterprets Jesus' request to remove the covering stone (v. 38-39). Jesus obliquely responds to Martha, indicating his intentions are other than what she is assuming (v. 40). The stone is removed, and Jesus thanks his Father (v. 41) for hearing his request (v. 42), and he then summons Lazarus from the tomb (v. 43). Lazarus emerges from the tomb in his burial clothes, which Jesus instructs be removed from him (v. 44).

v38 "It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it", the AB states vertical shaft tombs were most common at that time. The stone was to keep animals away. Tombs were typically well outside the village so as to avoid ritual impurity.

v39-40 Martha is warning Jesus that Lazarus has been in the tomb four days. She assumed he didn't know how long Lazarus had been there and thinking Jesus was going to enter the tomb she warned him away from it. Jesus obviously has no intention of entering the tomb.

Jesus' reply is addressing something else entirely. Superficially, it seems he is addressing her lack of faith, but in v. 21-22, and v. 27 it is plain Martha's faith is that Jesus can raise Lazarus from the dead. As the issue cannot be Martha's faith, what Jesus must be doing here is pointing out to her that she has misinterpreted his actions in having the stone removed. His intent is not to enter the tomb, it is to have Lazarus exit the tomb. And, in doing so glorify the Son and therefore the Father.

v41-43 Jesus already knows the relationship he has with the Father, it is the Jews who are not perceiving that relationship. Thus, Jesus performs a miracle so stunning in such a clear and public manner that none can doubt who Jesus is and his relationship with the Father.

The prayer Jesus offers is similar to that by Elijah in 1 Kings 18:37, and Elijah brought back a child from the dead as well. John includes details like this to evidence Jesus' similarity with these other great prophets whom Jews recognize as

such, yet reject him.

v42 Jesus' deliberately commits a very public act of deference to his Father in the presence of many Jews. He wants to make the relationship between God and himself very plain before committing a miracle that is unlike any other.

45 Then many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on him. 46 But some of them went their ways to the Pharisees, and told them what things Jesus had done.

v45-46 As is the case with other miracles, this one causes division among the people, cp. 6:65-66, 9:16. Some believe because of the miracle, but others run and tell the Pharisees what has happened. Thus, the lack of power such signs have in conversion. We can only assume those who did not accept it as a miracle were suspicious of chicanery on the part of Jesus and his disciples.

47 Then gathered the chief priests and the Pharisees a council, and said, What do we? for this man doeth many miracles. 48 If we let him thus alone, all [men] will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation. 49 And one of them, [named] Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said unto them, Ye know nothing at all, 50 Nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not. 51 And this spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; 52 And not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad. 53 Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death.

54 Jesus therefore walked no more openly among the Jews; but went thence unto a country near to the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim, and there continued with his disciples.

v47-54 The Sanhedrin gathers and conspires against Jesus because of the many miracles he is performing (v. 47). Using their sophistry, they determine he must be executed or the entire nation of Israel will be slaughtered by the Romans (v. 48-52). Thus, they conspire to dispose of him (v. 53). Jesus is aware of their desires, so he maintains a low profile until the time of the Passover (v. 54).

This session of the Sanhedrin would have taken place a few weeks before Passover as in v. 54 Jesus travels to Ephraim, and then v. 55 notes the ingathering to Jerusalem for Passover.

The reader must remember the Sanhedrin here was not a representative body of Jewish religious leadership, but was a

puppet assembly. When Herod the Great took power in Jerusalem he largely murdered the existing Sanhedrin and replaced them with imported Babylonian Pharisees. This group owed their positions of power to Herod and had no real connections to the natives, so their positions were politically and religiously quite difficult and messy. Naturally, this would create conditions encouraging self-promoting behavior and attract opportunistic individuals prone to such things. The result is a rather unsavory group of people, who will resort to murder to protect their interests.

v47 Jesus had healed the blind man in ch. 9 at the preceding Feast of Tabernacles, and the raising of Lazarus was just before Passover, so less than six months (probably three or four months) have passed. And, it is clear the people in general have not forgotten the healing of the blind man per v. 37. This would be in addition to all of the local lore and gossip about him.

v48 Rather than accept Jesus as messiah, they rationalize that if the people follow the Jesus they will revolt against the Romans, and then the Romans will destroy the nation. They have decided among themselves, despite all of the contrary evidence, Jesus isn't the messiah so they don't see the possibility of God delivering the Jews from the Romans through Jesus. And so they conclude, self-servingly, that Jesus has to be disposed of.

Such rationalization stares so blindly at logic it is stunning: Jesus never showed any interest in the role of king, he never suggested revolt against the Romans, he has never attempted to curry public favor for himself. What the Sanhedrin are looking at instead is the general Jewish population's desire for a physical deliverer, the kind of public sentiment that results in the triumphal entry in 12:12-15. So, while the one individual is just in his desires, they are going to execute him because of the popular views concerning him and not anything he has done. Jesus is thus the scapegoat, and the Sanhedrin is acting as the priests laying their hands on him to place the sins of the people on his head per Lev. 16.

"our place", the members of the Sanhedrin are very much interested in preserving their positions of power. In the event a Davidic monarchy was restored to Jerusalem the Sanhedrin would be dissolved. However, he may have been referring more broadly to the Temple, or to Jerusalem.

v49 "that same year", i.e., the year that Jesus dies.

v50 Caiaphas rationalizes it is better for one person to die than for that one person to lead to the seeming destruction of the entire nation at the hands of the Romans. Seemingly

justified, they counsel among themselves to have Jesus put to death. This is apparently the first time the Sanhedrin has united in its efforts to have Jesus disposed of. Prior attempts to get rid of him were apparently done by small independent groups of Pharisees as there was previously division among Sanhedrin, cf. 7:50-53, 9:16.

v51 John seems to imply the office Caiaphas holds entitles him to inspired prophecy, even if the man who holds the office fails to interpret the prophecy accurately. However, John is careful to point out the prophecy is "not of himself", rather it is from some other source, which John attributes to the office he holds. And John may not be suggesting inspiration at all. He might simply be suggesting that as a result of being in this position of authority he is forced to do something about the situation. And the decision he makes ends up being one that falls in with the greater eternal scheme of things.

Looking at the broader context, it seems likely John's intent is to show the inexorable nature of God's will when it comes to engineering human history. All through the Gospel up until this point, John presents the Pharisees as trying to trap and kill Jesus and failing at it because they were powerless to do so. Only when Jesus submits to their desires do they succeed.

Thus, Caiaphas is little more than a pawn in a particular office at a particular time. He considers himself a man of power and influence, but the reality is his situation is divinely engineered, so ends up unwittingly uttering an ironic prediction. He wants to save the Jewish nation from physical destruction as well as his position of political power. In doing so he creates the circumstances which will bring about the eternal salvation of not only the Jewish nation, but all Israel and all nations (cf. v. 52). He succeeds in his selfish and evil desires only because they fit into God's plan. This "prophecy" that Caiaphas utters is then not inspired in the sense of him receiving utterance from the Holy Spirit, rather it is "inspired" because God has engineered the situation so that his goals fit into God's plans.

v52 Compare 10:16, Jer. 31:8-11, Ezek. 34:11-16.

55 And the Jews' passover was nigh at hand: and many went out of the country up to Jerusalem before the passover, to purify themselves. 56 Then sought they for Jesus, and spake among themselves, as they stood in the temple, What think ye, that he will not come to the feast? 57 Now both the chief priests and the Pharisees had given a commandment, that, if any man knew where he were, he should shew [it], that they might take him.

v55-57 The opposition from the Sanhedrin becomes so strong (v. 57) Jesus leaves Jerusalem for more remote regions where he is

out of their grasp (v. 54) until Passover arrives. All of the people anticipate Jesus' arrival at the Passover because of the messianic deliverance themes of that feast, but they are also wondering if he will show himself given the blatant hostility of the Sanhedrin (v. 55-56).

At this time Judas had not yet conspired with the Sanhedrin to betray Jesus. But, the general knowledge of their conspiracy is probably what led him to them after deciding on betrayal.

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