

John 11:45-54: The Key to John's Chronological and Narrative Structure

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(Due to time limitations for the presentation of this paper, several issues could not be fully explored. It is my intention to do a book-length treatment of the subject matter discussed below.)

Much of John's gospel differs significantly from the synoptic gospels in both chronological structure and in the narrative description of details that seem to revolve around parallel episodes. This is probably most apparent in the divergent accounts of Jesus' last visit to Jerusalem and in related issues.

In the synoptic gospels, the last visit begins about five days before the final Passover and lasts for about three days. In the synoptic gospels the reason for plotting against Jesus is fear and jealousy over a political rival who can command a large following that might seek to declare him king, replacing the priestly rulers. Confrontational incidents in the synoptic gospel accounts of the last visit include the Triumphal Entry, the chasing of the money-changers, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, and a debate over the messiah's credentials. At the conclusion of the visit, the priests conspire to see how they can put their political rival to death. After Jesus' arrest several additional events play off of this theme, including, but not limited to, a trial over messianic issues and the mocking of Jesus by Jewish officials on two occasions.

In John, the last visit to Jerusalem begins during the Festival of Booths, about six months before Passover and ends during the Festival of Dedication, about two and a half months later, ending almost four months before Passover. During this lengthy time-frame there appears to be little if any fear by the authorities that Jesus represents any sort of threat to their political leadership. John and the synoptic gospels appear to have almost no overlap of events in these competing accounts of the last visit, although I will suggest further below that some parallels may have been overlooked. John also lacks any specific account of the messianic trial and of the mockeries by Jewish officials.

It is the thesis of this paper that John 11:45-54, that gospel's account of the plot to kill Jesus, establishes a major change to the Passion story from that in the synoptic gospels and that change had an editorial ripple effect throughout John's gospel in order to make the larger narrative consistent with John's alternative story line. This editorial ripple effect, I suggest, is responsible for many of the chronological and narrative differences between John and the synoptic gospels.

Many scholars have expressed concerns over John 11:45-54 and consider it highly problematic. Other than linking it to the immediately preceding account of the raising of Lazarus, though, the story is usually considered in isolation from the rest of the gospel. In this paper, I will look at several of the synoptic gospel incidents related to the theme of jealousy and fear of Jesus as a political rival and look at how John interacts with those incidents. But first, let me examine John's account of the plot to kill Jesus and place it in context.

John's Plot to Kill Jesus

Immediately preceding John's version of the plot, he tells us the story of the raising of Lazarus, which doesn't appear in the synoptic gospels. John 11:45-46 describes the reaction to that event. Many people who saw what happened became followers of Jesus, but other witnesses reported the incident to the Pharisees. This led to the call of the council into session. John 11:47-53 tells us what happened at the council meeting.

During the council meeting, some of the members complained.

“What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.”¹

Note that the initial concern over Jesus is not that his popularity makes him a political rival but that his popularity would cause the Romans to immediately destroy the nation and the Temple. From the council's perspective, Jesus is not a political rival because there will be nothing left for either party to govern. They see him, instead, as a potential catalyst for the Roman destruction of the Temple and the nation. Caiaphas, however, explains to the council that they overestimate the threat to Israel because a solution is available.

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all! 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.”²

Caiaphas is saying that the country can be saved if we sacrifice just this one person, not because he is a political rival but because Rome will not harm the country or the Temple. This suggests that the council hadn't previously considered the possibility of putting Jesus to death and Caiaphas had to explain why it was necessary. But John throws in an editorial kicker.

He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God.³

This prophecy, though, is Delphic-like. John is being ironic. It doesn't mean what Caiaphas thinks it means. The death of Jesus doesn't save the nation from Rome on an earthly level. It offers salvation to the nation on a heavenly level. More specifically, in terms of plot, John implies that God wanted, and arranged for, the council to have Jesus killed so that he can rise from the dead, a feat even greater than raising Lazarus. Jesus would raise his own dead body back to life.

¹ Jn 11:47-48.

² Jn 11:49-50.

³ Jn 1:51-52.

At the conclusion of the council meeting the council determined that Jesus should be put to death. John 11:54 says that pursuant to this decision Jesus withdrew to the wilderness and no longer went openly among the Jews.

In John, therefore, the death of Jesus is not about such trite worldly concerns as political rivalry among temporal leaders. It is about God's plan to offer eternal life to the nation of Israel. Caiaphas just didn't understand how he was being used. To a large extent, John's version of the plot is far more sympathetic to and respectful of the Jewish people and the Jewish authorities than is the synoptic gospel version.

If I am right, then we should see some additional evidence that John has changed the plot and that there are other occasions where he offers an alternative to the synoptic gospel account of the priestly motive. In what follows I will address some of the major areas where this interaction occurs.

The Triumphal Entry

I'll begin with the Triumphal Entry to Jerusalem. John's version is very different from the synoptic gospel account. although not obviously so. In Mark, as Jesus nears Jerusalem, he mounts a donkey and rides towards the city gates. A large crowd greets and hails him, shouting out:

“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”⁴

Two observations here. First, the crowd hails Jesus as a Davidic messiah, ushering in an earthly kingdom, an alternative to the ruling priesthood. Second, to a Jewish audience of that time, a royal claimant on a donkey, in opposition to the ruling authorities, riding amid great cheers, would appear to be a re-enactment of Solomon's method of seizing the throne from Adonijah, David's lawful heir. According to the account in the first book of Kings,

So the priest Zadok, the prophet Nathan, and Benaiah son of Jehoiada, and the Cherethites and the Pelethites, went down and had Solomon ride on King David's mule, and led him to Gihon. There the priest Zadok took the horn of oil from the tent and anointed Solomon. Then they blew the trumpet, and all the people said, “Long live King Solomon!” And all the people went up following him, playing on pipes and rejoicing with great joy, so that the earth quaked at their noise.⁵

In the synoptic gospels, therefore, the Jewish council has observed a popular individual hailed as a potential Davidic messiah re-enacting a ride that led to the seizure of the throne from a current ruler. This might worry them a bit. At the end of the donkey ride, Jesus enters the city and goes to the Temple. Apparently, everyone was gone for the day and he left the city.

⁴ Mk 11:9-10.

⁵ 1 Ki 1:38-40.

How does John handle this episode? To begin with, he places it sometime time after Jesus' last visit to Jerusalem. Second, John doesn't have Jesus ride the donkey. When he makes his appearance before the crowd he walks, and the crowd cheers as he passes by. They call out, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord— **the King of Israel** [emphasis added]!"⁶

In John, the crowd makes no mention of David and the earthly implications of his coming kingdom. The crowd does hail Jesus as a "king of Israel" but John's use of "king" is ambiguous here. Later, however, he clarifies the term when John's Jesus says to Pilate,

"My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."⁷

These remarks to Pilate show that Jesus has publicly rejected any claim to being an earthly ruler. John's vision of kingship is not about an earthly Davidic messiah but a heavenly ruler. John's elimination of David's name from the crowd's cheer serves to undermine the image of an earthly ruler threatening the authority of the political rulers. But John goes even further in eliminating the Davidic symbolism in the synoptic story.

Only after Jesus does his meet and greet with the crowd, does he find a donkey and sit on it. But he doesn't ride the donkey towards the Jerusalem gate or enter the city. Instead, he remains seated on the animal and holds court, talking with the people who are there. He also adds a quote from Zechariah 9:9 about the "king" sitting on a donkey. In this manner, John eliminates the image of Jesus re-enacting Solomon's actions in seizing the throne and continues the vague use of the term "king." To summarize, John has removed the two symbolic images of a Davidic messiah present in the synoptic account of the Triumphal Entry.

Chasing the Money-changers

The next day, in Mark, Jesus returns to the Temple. It is the first day of direct confrontation with the authorities and Mark leads with the chasing of the money-changers. This is the most significant synoptic gospel conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. I have broken down Mark's version of the story into several elements

- Jesus chases the money changers.
- He accuses the authorities of turning the Temple into a den of robbers.
- Upon that accusation the chief priests and scribes "kept looking for a way to kill him."⁸
- The authorities feared that the crowd was spellbound by his teaching.
- The next day, the chief priests ask him, "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?"⁹ The only reference point for "these things" would be the chasing of the money-changers and, perhaps, the Triumphal Entry.

⁶ John 12:13

⁷ Jn 18:36.

⁸ Mk 11:18.

⁹ Mk 11:28.

- Jesus says he won't answer unless they tell him whether the baptism of John came from earthly origins or heaven. Mark presents it as a trick question based on the assumption that John the Baptist testified to Jesus' authority as the messiah. This response by Jesus again positions him in a politically confrontational manner that portrays him as a messianic replacement for the Jewish authorities.

Despite some superficial resemblance, John's version of the chasing of the money-changers differs in many respects from the synoptic gospel version. The main storyline appears in John 2:13-22. The death threat occurs at John 7:19, the first day of conflict during Jesus' final visit to Jerusalem. I'll comment on this separation after looking at the other elements of the story.

- To begin with, John places the story two years earlier than Mark does but, like Mark, places it just before a Passover.
- After chasing the money-changers, John changes the accusation. Jesus says, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" This is very different from Mark's accusation. In the latter, Jesus has attacked the priestly leaders on a personal level, accusing them of criminal corruption. John's accusation is far softer and makes no personal attacks on the priesthood. John, here, doesn't present Jesus as someone challenging the right of the chief priests to remain in charge.
- That John has a different take here is demonstrated by the omission of the synoptic gospel claim that the priests wanted to kill Jesus because of this action. John skips over that detail, straight to the question about authority. He says "the Jews" asked him to perform a sign to demonstrate his authority. The request for a sign is more consistent with the authorities testing whether Jesus might be a prophet rather than an indication that they fear him as a messiah seeking to oust the ruling class.
- John's response to the authority question by Jesus is also very different from Mark's. John lacks Mark's confrontational messianic response about John the Baptist. Instead, Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." This is a response more consistent with a prophet than of an earthly messiah.
- John adds an editorial gloss indicating that Jesus used the term "Temple" as a symbol of his body, so that what Jesus actually meant was that if the authorities killed him, he would rise up in three days. By placing the context in terms of Jesus' rising from the dead, John has taken the conflict out of the realm of earthly political rivalry.
- As a result of this confrontation, Jesus acquired many followers.

In John's version, the authorities express no fear or hatred of Jesus and only wonder if he might be some sort of prophet proposing a reform of Temple practices. There is no plan to kill Jesus because of his actions. Although he makes two more visits to Jerusalem after this, the final one lasting over three months, the conflict over the chasing of the money-changers never comes up again. By positioning the money-changers incident two years earlier than in the synoptic account and eliminating the desire to kill Jesus over his actions, John has completely neutralized the incident as evidence of political rivalry.

But John has gone even further. Not only has he isolated the desire to kill Jesus for chasing the money-changers from the money-changers incident, he has also changed the reason why the priests sought his death. Recall here that in Mark, the desire to kill Jesus came on the first day of confrontation at the Temple during the final visit to Jerusalem.

John also shows the authorities wanting to kill Jesus on the first day of confrontation at the Temple during the final visit to Jerusalem, but the hostility arises in connection with Jesus having healed someone on the Sabbath during a previous visit to Jerusalem, as depicted in John 5. In the final visit, in John 7, Jesus goes to the Temple on the first day of his arrival and says, “Why are you looking for an opportunity to kill me?”¹⁰ Shortly after, he expands upon the threat. “If a man receives circumcision on the sabbath in order that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because I healed a man’s whole body on the Sabbath?”¹¹

In John, the death threat arising on the first day of conflict at the Temple is a legal dispute over healing on the Sabbath and not a political dispute over a potential messianic rival. Other than this threat on the first day of Jesus’ visit to the Temple, throughout John’s lengthy account of Jesus’ final visit to Jerusalem, running from John 7 through John 10, he never again depicts the Jewish authorities as wanting to kill Jesus. In John 9, which features another Sabbath healing, and which takes place during the final visit story, the idea that Jesus should be killed never comes up. At most, the argument is only over whether Jesus might be a sinner or a prophet.

So, John has retained in John 7 a death threat on the first day of confrontation during the last visit to Jerusalem, but he has isolated it from the money-changers story and changed the reason from a political dispute to a legal argument over the Sabbath.

The Parable of the Wicked Tenant

Following the argument over authority, Mark presents the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. To summarize quickly, the key element of the parable is that the landlord sent his “beloved” son to collect the rent, and the greedy tenants killed him. As a result, the landlord “will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.”¹²

The parable clearly refers to Jesus as the son who would be killed and indicates that the authority of the priesthood will be given to others. It is a straightforward attack on the priesthood and Mark says that the priests understood it in that manner. “When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.”¹³

John doesn’t do parables but I believe he has historicized this particular one. After the arguments and debates in John 7 over plans to kill Jesus for the Sabbath violation, John has Jesus say almost immediately after:

“You know me, and you know where I am from. **I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him.** I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me [emphasis added].”¹⁴

This seems to be a reasonable historicized substitute for the Parable of the Wicked Tenant. At virtually the same narrative location as Mark’s Parable, John, in his account of the last visit, has

¹⁰ Jn. 7:19.

¹¹ Jn. 7:23.

¹² Mk 12:9.

¹³ Mk 12:12.

¹⁴ Jn 7:28.

Jesus talk about being sent by the one who is true, and he and the sender being rejected by the authorities. But John has omitted any claim that the death of the one sent will lead to the removal of the authorities. Additionally, as with the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, a desire to arrest Jesus immediately after these remarks fails.

The Davidic Messiah Debate

The last element of political rivalry in the synoptic gospels account of the last visit to Jerusalem consists of an implied debate between Jesus and the scribes, in which Jesus seems to say that even if he weren't the son of David, he could still be the messiah. The context seems to suggest that somebody challenged Jesus' messianic status as a Davidic messiah and Jesus responded that the argument was in error. I won't get into the theological interpretations of this incident, but it is apparent that Jesus is raising messianic issues about a possible rival to the ruling authorities.

During John's account of the final visit to Jerusalem, again in John 7, he also showcases a debate over whether the messiah has to be a descendant of David. But in John, Jesus doesn't debate the issue with the scribes; unidentified members of the crowd argue with each other, different factions taking different sides on various arguments. The one that is particularly relevant here is one in which some of the debaters say,

“Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived.”¹⁵

This seems a reasonably good parallel to the synoptic account, where Jesus discusses whether the messiah has to be descended from David. But here, John isolates Jesus from the argument and the issue is left open, unresolved by the debaters. John does not show Jesus claiming that he could be a messiah even if he wasn't a descendant of David. John eliminated any direct evidence that Jesus threatened the authorities as a potential earthly messiah replacing earthly rulers.

The Jewish Council's Trial of Jesus

In the synoptic gospels the council asks Jesus if he is the messiah and/or the son of God. Mark and Luke have very different takes on this inquiry. Mark has a single question involving both titles and Jesus responds, “I am.”¹⁶ The council then convicts Jesus of blasphemy. Luke, however, divides the inquiry into two separate questions with very different answers. Jesus dodges the question of whether he is the messiah and, as to the question about being the son of God, Luke's Jesus say “you say that I am.”¹⁷ Luke not only contradicts Mark's version of the answer, but he also omits the verdict of blasphemy.

John has no version of this council inquiry, but, at John 10:23-39, he appears to have moved the substance of this inquiry from a council inquiry to a street argument with the crowds. John

¹⁵ Jn 7:41-42.

¹⁶ Mk 14:62.

¹⁷ Lk 22:70.

appears to follow Luke's organization of the data having some similar questions and answers but also agreeing with Mark that Jesus admitted to being the son of God. Two quick observations:

First, where Mark and Luke have what I identify as a secondary description of Jesus as sitting at the right hand of power, John substitutes, "the Father and I are one."¹⁸ This change reflects John's alternative theology of Jesus and God as one as opposed to the synoptic gospel claim that Jesus is a second entity sitting next to God.

Second, John places the admission to being the son of God after the blasphemy accusation but does so in the past tense. He says that he already admitted it, which suggests that the admission came before the blasphemy charge, but John doesn't actually show the crowd asking and Jesus answering the question. John is treating the earlier statement, "the Father and I are one" as the equivalent of "son of God."

The Mockeries of Jesus

Mark has two occasions when the Jewish authorities mock Jesus as a false messiah, after the trial and during the crucifixion. Mockery constitutes a form of gloating by political victors over a defeated rival. John omits both mockery incidents.

Conclusions

In this paper I reviewed several important stories in the synoptic gospel accounts depicting Jesus as a feared political rival needing to be killed and how John interacted with those stories. I have looked at the synoptic accounts of the Triumphal Entry scene, the chasing of the money-changers, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, the Messianic debates over whether Jesus could be a non-Davidic messiah, the trial of Jesus, and the mockery of Jesus. There are other incidents that I haven't mentioned in this paper but which exhibit a similar pattern. In all cases discussed John eliminated any indications that Jesus presented himself to the authorities as an earthly Davidic messiah challenging the Jewish authorities or that the Jewish authorities saw him in such a manner.

John's chronological structure, placing the chasing of the money-changers two years earlier than the synoptic gospels and moving the last visit to Jerusalem to an earlier and longer time frame appears to be a direct result of his efforts to reframe the Passion story in a way that removes fear of a political rival as the reason why the priests want to put Jesus to death.

The only portion of John's months-long account of the last visit to Jerusalem that bears any relation to the synoptic gospel account falls solely within John 7's account of the first day of Jesus' visit. The rest of John's lengthy last visit account in John 8-10 appears to be John's creative effort to demonstrate that despite a long time-period in Jerusalem in Jesus' last days, political rivalry was never an issue and there was no effort by the authorities to punish Jesus for being a political rival.

¹⁸ Jn 10:30.