

**THE TRIALS OF THE KING**  
*The Hearing Before The High Priest*  
**Matthew 26:57-68**  
**Jesus' Six Trials**

**Religious Trials**

|                             |                  |
|-----------------------------|------------------|
| Before <i>Annas</i>         | John 18:12-14    |
| Before <i>Caiaphas</i>      | Matthew 26:57-68 |
| Before the <i>Sanhedrin</i> | Matthew 27:1-2   |

**Civil Trials**

|                      |                                 |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|
| Before <i>Herod</i>  | Luke 23:6-12                    |
| Before <i>Pilate</i> | John 18:39 - 19:6               |
| Before <i>Pilate</i> | Matthew 27:11-26; John 18:28-38 |

Jews have always prided themselves on their sense of *fairness* and *justice*, and rightly so. The *judicial systems* in the *modern Western world* have their foundations in the legal system of ancient Israel, which itself was founded on the standards set forth in their Scriptures...the Old Testament.

The essence of the Old Testament system of jurisprudence is found in **Deuteronomy**:

*“You shall appoint for yourself judges and officers in all your towns which the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial, and you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, that you may live and possess the land which the Lord your God is giving you.”*

~Deuteronomy 16:18-20

As the Hebrews worked out specific judicial procedures following those general principles, they determined that *any community that had at least 120 men* who were heads of families could *form a local council*. In later years, after the Babylonian exile, that council often was composed of the *synagogue leadership*. The council came to be known as a **Sanhedrin**, from a Greek term (*sunedrion*) that literally means *"sitting together."* A *local Sanhedrin* was composed of up to

*23 members*, and the **Sanhedrin** in **Jerusalem** was composed of *70 chief priests, elders, and scribes*, with the *high priest* making a *total of 71*. In all the **Sanhedrins'** an odd number of members was maintained in order to eliminate the possibility of a tie vote.

Members of *local Sanhedrin's* were to be chosen because of their *maturity* and *wisdom*, and the *national Sanhedrin* was to be composed of those who had distinguished themselves in a local council and had served a form of apprenticeship in the national council. But long before Jesus' day, *membership* in the *national Sanhedrin* had degenerated largely into *appointments based on religious or political favoritism and influence*. The **Herods**, especially **Herod the Great**, exercised considerable control over the *national Sanhedrin*, and even the **pagan Romans** sometimes became involved in the *appointment* or *removal* of a *high priest*.

The general requirements of fairness and impartiality prescribed in **Deuteronomy 16:18-20** and elsewhere in the **Mosaic Law** were reflected in the rabbinical requirements that guaranteed an accused criminal the right...

- *To a public trial.*
- *To defense counsel, and...*
- *Conviction only on the testimony of at least two reliable witnesses.*

Trials were therefore always *open to public scrutiny*, and the *defendant* had the right to bring forth *evidence* and *witnesses* in his own behalf, no matter how damning the evidence and testimony against him might be.

*To guard against false witnessing*, whether given *out of revenge* or *for a bribe*, the **Mosaic law** prescribed that *a person who knowingly gave false testimony would suffer the very punishment the accused would suffer if found guilty* (**Deuteronomy 19:16-19**). A person who gave false testimony in a trial that involved capital punishment, for example, would himself be put to death. For obvious reasons, that penalty was *a strong deterrent to perjury* and an *effective protection of justice*. An additional deterrent was the requirement that *accusing witnesses in a capital case were to initiate the execution*, making them stand behind their testimony by action as well as words (**Deuteronomy 17:7**). It was that law to which Jesus made indirect reference when He told the accusers of the woman taken in adultery, *"He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her"* (**John 8:7**).

*Rabbinical law* required that *a sentence of death could not be carried out until the third day after it was rendered* and that *during the intervening day the members of the court were too fast*. That provision had two great effects. First, it *prevented a trial during a feast*, when fasting was prohibited. Second, the delay of execution *provided additional time for evidence or testimony to be discovered in the defendant's behalf*.

**Simon Greenleaf** was a famous professor of law at **Harvard University**. In his book *[The Testimony of the Evangelists](#)* ([Jersey City, NJ: Frederick P. Linn, 1881], pp. 581-84) a section written by lawyer **Joseph Salvador** gives fascinating and significant information about proper **Sanhedrin** trial procedure.

- Because a defendant was *protected against self-incrimination, his confession*, no matter how convincing, *was not sufficient in itself for conviction*.
- On the day of the trial the court officers would require *all evidence against the accused person to be read in the full hearing of open court*.
- Each witness against him would be required to *affirm that his testimony was true to the best of his knowledge and was based on his own direct experience and not on hearsay or presumption*.
- Witnesses also had to *identify the precise month, day, hour, and location of the event* about which they testified.
- A council itself *could not initiate charges against a person* but could *only consider charges brought before it by an outside party*.
- A woman was *not allowed to testify* because she was considered to lack the courage to *give the first blow* if the accused were *convicted and sentenced to death*.
- Children *could not testify* because of their *immaturity*, nor could a *slave*, a *person of bad character*, or a *person* who was *considered mentally incompetent*.
- There was always to be *presumption of innocence*, and great latitude was given the accused in presenting his defense.
- In a local council, *eleven votes out of the total of twenty-three were required for acquittal, but thirteen were required for conviction*.
- If the accused was *found innocent*, he was *freed immediately*.

- But if he was *found guilty, the sentence was not pronounced until two days later* and, as mentioned above, *the council members were required to fast during the intervening day*.
- On the morning of the *third day* the council was reconvened, and *each judge*, in turn, *was asked if he had changed his decision*. A vote for *condemnation could be changed to acquittal*, but *not the reverse*.
- If a *guilty verdict was reaffirmed*, an *officer with a flag* remained near the council while *another officer*, often mounted on horseback, *escorted the prisoner* to the place of execution. A *herald* went before the slow-moving procession declaring in a loud voice, *"This man* (stating his name) *is led to punishment for* (the crime was stated); *the witnesses who have sworn against him are* (stating the names of the persons); *if anyone has evidence to give in his favor, let him come forth quickly."* If, at any time before the sentence was carried out, *additional information pertaining to innocence came to light*, including the prisoner's recollection of something he had forgotten, *one officer would signal the other, and the prisoner would be brought back* to the council for *reconsideration of the verdict*.
- Before the place of execution was reached, the *condemned person* was urged to *confess his crime*, if he had not already done so, and was given a *strong drink* to *dull his senses* and thereby make his *death less painful*.
- The governing principle in capital cases was: *"The Sanhedrin is to save, not destroy, life."*
- In addition to the above provisions, the president of the council was *required to remind prospective witnesses* of the *preciousness of human life* and to *admonish them to be certain their testimony was both true and complete*.
- No criminal trial *could begin during or continued into the night*.
- The *property of an executed criminal could not be confiscated but was passed to his heirs*.
- *Voting was done from the youngest member to the oldest* in order that the former would not be influenced by the latter.
- And *if a council voted unanimously for conviction, the accused was set free, because the necessary element of mercy was presumed to be lacking*.

It is obvious that, *when properly administered*, the Jewish system of justice was not only *eminently fair* but *merciful*.

It is obvious that the system did not operate either fairly or mercifully in Jesus' trial, because the Sanhedrin violated virtually every principle of its own system of jurisprudence.

- Jesus was *illegally tried without first having been charged with a crime*.
- He was *tried at night* and *in private*.
- *No defense was permitted Him*.
- The witnesses against Him had been *bribed to falsify their testimony*.
- He was *executed on the same day He was sentenced*.
- Consequently, the judges *could not have fasted on the intervening day* that should have transpired and *no opportunity to reconsider their verdict* was given.
- The only procedure that was properly followed was the offering of the *strong drink*, but that was done by **Roman** soldiers, not by representatives of the **Sanhedrin** (**Mark 15:23**).

As is clear from the gospel accounts, *Jesus had two types of trials, one Jewish and religious and the other Roman and secular*. Because Rome reserved the right of execution, the Sanhedrin was not allowed to dispense capital punishment (**John 18:31**). The fact that it did on several occasions, as with the *stoning of Stephen* (**Acts 6:12-14; Acts 7:54-60**), does not prove the legality of it. It is likely, however, that many illegal executions by the Sanhedrin were simply overlooked by Roman authorities for the sake of political expediency. For them, the loss of a single life was a small price to pay to keep order and peace. The only blanket exception that Rome granted was for the immediate execution of a Gentile who trespassed a restricted area of the Temple.

It is also significant that both *the Jewish religious and Roman secular trials of Jesus had three phases, meaning that, within about twelve hours, Jesus faced legal proceedings on six separate occasions before His crucifixion*. The Jewish trial began with His being taken before the former high priest **Annas** in the middle of the night. **Annas** then sent Him to the presiding high priest, **Caiaphas**, who had quickly convened the Sanhedrin at his own house. **Caiaphas** and the Sanhedrin met a second time after daylight on Friday morning.

After the Jewish religious leaders had concluded their sham hearings, they took Jesus to the Roman procurator, **Pilate**, first of all because they could not carry out a death sentence without his permission. But they also went to him because a Roman crucifixion would help obscure their own reprehensible involvement in what they knew were totally unjust proceedings and condemnation.

When **Pilate** discovered Jesus was a **Galilean**, he sent Him to **Herod Antipas**, the *tetrarch* of **Galilee** and **Perea**, who was in Jerusalem for the **Passover**. After being questioned and treated with contempt by **Herod** and his soldiers, Jesus was sent back to **Pilate**, who reluctantly consented to His crucifixion.

#### I. THE CONVENING OF THE COUNCIL: (vs. 57-58)

**Those who had seized Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were gathered together (vs. 57)**...After Jesus was arrested in the **Garden of Gethsemane**, we learn from **John (John 18:13)** that He was first led by the soldiers to **Annas**, who was **Caiaphas' father-in-law**, for a brief hearing...and then to **Caiaphas, the high priest**. It was **Annas** who wielded the greatest influence in Temple affairs. That delaying tactic apparently gave **Caiaphas** time to quickly assemble the Sanhedrin (vs. 59).

**But Peter was following Him at a distance as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and entered in, and sat down with the officers to see the outcome (vs. 58)**...**Peter**, now fully awake, followed Jesus and the crowd into the **courtyard of the high priest** to watch and await the outcome.

The fact that **Peter** and others were sitting in **the courtyard of the high priest** reveals still another infraction of Jewish legal protocol. The Sanhedrin was only permitted to hold a trial involving capital punishment in the Temple and only in public. The private meeting at **Caiaphas's** house clearly violated both requirements.

#### II. A CONSPIRACY TO CONVICT: (vs. 59-61)

**Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, so that they might put Him to death (vs. 59)**...The purpose of Jesus' trials was to find some legal basis on which to condemn **Him to death**. **Judas'** testimony was crucial to the religious leaders' case, but he was nowhere to be

found. As a result, witnesses were sought from the crowd **against Jesus...a highly unusual**, and *illegal* court procedure.

The **Council** was empowered to act only as *judge* and *jury* in legal proceedings. They *could not instigate charges*. By now, they were willing to do whatever was necessary to condemn Him...anything that would make Him worthy of death...even if it meant violating every *biblical* and *rabbinical rule of justice*.

**They did not find any, even though many false witnesses came forward. But later on two came forward (vs. 60)**...While many **false witnesses** volunteered, none of them could agree on anything against Jesus (**Mark 14:56**). Finally, **two** witnesses agreed that Jesus had once said something about *destroying the temple*.

**And said, “This man stated, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.’” (vs. 61)**...But even in their agreement of what they said that they had heard Jesus say, they *miss quoted* Him. Jesus had said something similar, approximately three years earlier at the outset of His ministry...but He was referring not to the temple building, but to His body. What He actually said was...

*“Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up’.”*

~John 2:19

It’s interesting that this one statement that was used against Him was recalled just before His *crucifixion* and *resurrection*.

### III. THEIR CONFRONTATION TO CONNECT: (vs. 62-64)

**The high priest stood up and said to Him, “Do You not answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?” (vs. 62)**... The high priest attempted to get Jesus to respond to the accusations made by the two witnesses. But keep in mind, these were *not official charges*...only *accusations*. As a result, Jesus refused to answer.

**But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, “I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God.” (vs. 63)**...Appealing to the most *sacred oath* a Jew could utter...**Caiaphas** demanded that Jesus either *affirm* or *deny* His *Messiahship* and *deity*. Jesus had remained **silent** until the **high priest** placed Him under this *sacred oath*. But

once the **high priest** charged Jesus under oath **by the living God**...Jesus was able to answer truthfully.

**Caiaphas** insisted that Jesus answer if He was **the Christ...the Messiah...the Son of God**. Jesus answered in the *affirmative*... adding that in the future He would *sit on His throne*...at the **right hand** of God.

*“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne.”*

~Matthew 25:31

Jesus said to him, **“You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (vs. 64)**... Not only does Jesus answer in the *affirmative* His *deity*, but He also affirms His *second coming*.

**And coming on the clouds of heaven...**

*“And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.”*

~Matthew 24:30-31

All of this was a very clear statement of His *deity*...and it was clearly understood by the **high priest**.

### IV. THEIR CONDEMNATION OF CHRIST: (vs. 65-66)

**Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy (vs. 65)**...In his response, the **high priest** violated *Levitical law*...which forbid him to **tear his robe**.

*“The priest who is the highest among his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil has been poured and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not uncover his head nor tear his clothes”*

~Leviticus 21:10

By saying that there was no **further need** for additional **witnesses** ...He was saying that Jesus' own words had revealed His guilt...that He had **blasphemed**.

The people had only *two choices*. One was to *acknowledge that Jesus had spoken the truth...and fall down and worship Him as Messiah*. The other was to *reject Him as a blasphemer and put Him to death*. They chose the latter...thus sealing their rejection of the One who came as *their Messiah...their King*. The One who came *to pay the penalty for their sin*.

**What do you think? They answered, "He deserves death!" (vs. 66)...**

No further evidence was examined at this point. No one defended Jesus or pointed to His works that He had performed among them during the past 3 years. It appeared that the Sanhedrin had Jesus exactly where they wanted Him. He had just blasphemy...which they all heard. Contrary to all Jewish and Roman law, they took it on themselves to begin to punish the accused.

#### V. **THE CONDUCT OF THE COURT:** (vs. 67-68)

**Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him (vs. 67)...**To Jews...the *supreme insult* was to *spit in another's face* (**Numbers 12:14; Deuteronomy 25:9**).

These actions they continued doing...seemingly enjoying every moment of it.

**And said, "Prophecy to us, You Christ; who is the one who hit You?" (vs. 68)...**

Jesus remained silent throughout this terrible ordeal...submitting Himself to His Father's will.

*"He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth."*

~Isaiah 53:7

*"While being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously"*

~I Peter 2:23

#### **LESSONS WE CAN LEARN:**

- **The evidence regarding Christ demands a verdict.** Many people throughout time have been confronted with the gospel and have rejected Christ just like the Sanhedrin. It isn't that the evidence about Christ hasn't been carefully examined. And it isn't that the evidence has been found to be untrue or unconvincing. It's simply that they have refused to consider or accept the evidence at all.
- **Even though the trial against Jesus was illegal and the verdict unjust...it fulfilled God's purposed plan of redemption.** We think on the basis of *moral good*...God works based on *purposed good*.