

## THE RELIGIOUS TRIAL OF JESUS

The enemies of God always fight dirty. Nowhere will that be more evident than Jesus' religious trial before the Sanhedrin, the ruling council and supreme court of Israel. In their craze to kill Jesus, they violated 22 of their own judicial laws.

### THE ARREST

**(Matt. 26:47-56; Mark 14:43-52; Luke 22:47-53; John 18:2-11)**

It was April 7<sup>th</sup>, 30 A.D., the night Jesus celebrated Passover with His disciples. Judas had already accepted the Sanhedrin's bribe to deliver Jesus to them. Bribing Judas violated rule #1:

*#1 There was to be no arrest by religious authorities that was effected by a bribe.*

By calling Judas out as His betrayer, Jesus forced Judas to act that night to lead the authorities to a place they could arrest Jesus without causing a riot. That place was Gethsemane, an olive grove outside the city walls on the slope of the Mount of Olives.

*JOHN 18:2 (ESV)*

**Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place (Gethsemane), for Jesus often met there with his disciples.**

When Judas left the Passover Seder, he first went to the chief priests who had bribed him. They then took him to Pontius Pilate where he accused Jesus of a crime punishable under Roman law. Pilate gave Judas a *cohort* of Roman soldiers. A *cohort* was one-tenth of a legion. A legion at full strength was 6000 men; up to 600 Roman soldiers accompanied Judas to arrest Jesus!

The fact that the arresting soldiers came

*JOHN 18:3 (ESV)*

**...with lanterns and torches and weapons.**

shows it was nighttime, probably near midnight, when the arrest occurred. This violated rule #2:

*#2 No steps of criminal proceedings were to occur after sunset.*

The arresting crowd included not only Roman soldiers but...

*LUKE 22:52 (ESV)*

**...chief priests and officers of the temple and elders, who had come out against him...**

*Officers of the temple* were Jewish temple police. The *chief priests* and *elders* included members of the Sanhedrin. Their presence violated rule #3:

*#3 Judges or members of the Sanhedrin were not allowed to participate in an arrest.*

According to the Gospel of John, the arresting forces led Jesus to Annas.

## **THE TRIAL BEFORE ANNAS**

**(John 18:12-14, 19-23)**

*JOHN 18:12-13 (ESV)*

**So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound him. First they led him to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year.**

Though Annas was not high priest, he was the real power behind his son-in-law, Caiaphas. The purpose of this trial was to establish a religious charge against Jesus. If they could convict Jesus of speaking disrespectfully about the Temple, they themselves could carry out the death sentence. This was the one capital offense the Romans allowed the Sanhedrin to prosecute themselves. A second capital offense deserving death was blasphemy. To blaspheme was to verbalize, to say, the name of God (YHWH).

Annas was hardly a neutral judge. Annas held a personal grudge against Jesus for twice cleansing the Temple. Selling animals and exchanging money in the Temple courtyard was Annas' doing.

By taking Jesus to trial in the middle of the night, Annas and members of the Sanhedrin violated rules #4 and #5:

*#4 There were to be no trials before the morning sacrifice.*

*#5 There were to be no secret trials, only public.*

Annas questioned Jesus about two key issues:

*JOHN 18:19-21 (ESV)*

**The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching.**

Annas was trying to find something by which to incriminate the disciples and Jesus. But Jesus turned the tables on Annas and insisted on His rights under Jewish civil law:

**Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them; they know what I said."**

Everything Jesus taught, He taught in public. Jesus challenged Annas to keep their own law and support their charges by producing two or three witnesses to prove He had said something amiss.

Annas was caught completely flat footed; they had no witnesses. It was a bust. No charge was established against Jesus. Annas sent Jesus to his son-in-law Caiaphas for the second phase of His religious trial.

*JOHN 18:24 (ESV)*

**Annas then sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.**

**THE TRIAL BEFORE CAIAPHAS AND THE SANHEDRIN  
(Matt. 26:57-68; Mark 14:53-65; Luke 22:54a; John 18:24)**

Luke tells us the Sanhedrin gathered in the high priest's house violating their sixth rule:

*#6 Sanhedrin trials could only be conducted in the Hall of Judgment of the Temple compound.*

The Sanhedrin consisted of 71 members; 46 Pharisees and 25 Sadducees. For a case involving the death penalty a minimum of 23 members was required. We do not know how many members of the Sanhedrin were present.

Matthew tells us this phase of the trial began with council members seeking false witness against Jesus:

*MATTHEW 26:59 (ESV)*

**Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death,**

Beginning the trial this way violated their seventh rule:

*#7 During the trial, the defense had the first word before the prosecutors could present the accusations.*

That the *chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus* broke rule number eight:

*#8 All could argue in favor of acquittal, but all could not argue in favor of conviction.*

Jesus' enemies produced one false witness after another, but they contradicted one another. Eventually they found two men who seemed to agree until they were cross-examined. One witness said:

*MARK 14:58 (ESV)*

**"We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.' "**

The other witness said

*MATTHEW 26:61 (ESV)*

**“This man said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.’ ”**

The first statement was a statement of intent, the second, a statement of ability. The statements disagreed. According to rule #9, Jesus should have been released:

*#9 There were to be two or three witnesses, and their testimonies had to agree in every detail.*

The prosecution was attempting to convict Jesus of disrespecting the Temple. But, in the end, they could not find two witnesses to establish the charge against Jesus.

All this frustrated Caiaphas the high priest. Matthew tells us:

*MATTHEW 26:62 (ESV)*

**And the high priest stood up and said, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?”**

Asking Jesus to speak to the issue after the witnesses had been proven false broke rule #10:

*#10 There was to be no allowance for the accused to testify against himself.*

Jesus knew His legal rights and did not answer.

*MATTHEW 26:63 (ESV)*

**But Jesus remained silent.**

All this, the discredited witnesses, Jesus’ silence, exasperated Caiaphas, so he went nuclear:

*MATTHEW 26:63 (ESV)*

**And the high priest said to him, “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.”**

Caiaphas put Jesus under oath when he said, *I adjure you by the living God*. A person placed under oath in a Jewish court of law in this way had to answer. Jesus answered Caiaphas:

*MATTHEW 26:64 (ESV)*

**Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.”**

Jesus answered clearly that He is the *Christ*, the Greek term for *Messiah*. He made it clear He is deity. Further, Jesus prophesied those who persecuted Him will see Him when He returns at the Second Coming seated at the right hand of *Power* and coming on the clouds of heaven. Notice Jesus did not speak the forbidden name YHWH, but substituted *Power* when He referred to God.

At this point several things happened in rapid succession:

*MATTHEW 26:65-66 (ESV)*

**Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgment?” They answered, “He deserves death.”**

This was legal theater. A high priest was forbidden to tear his robes except in the case of blasphemy (rule #11). Jesus had not spoken God's name; He had not committed blasphemy. The court had failed to produce even one credible witness much less the two required for conviction. This highly emotional display obscured the facts and inflamed the council members to declare Jesus guilty and to sentence Him to death.

Caiaphas violated rule #12 when he charged Jesus with blasphemy:

*#12 Judges could not initiate the charges; they could only investigate charges brought to them.*

Because the charge was specifically blasphemy, Caiaphas broke the 13<sup>th</sup> rule:

*#13 The accusation of blasphemy was only valid if the name of God itself was pronounced.*

Remember, Jesus never uttered the name of God so when Caiaphas said, *What further witnesses do we need?*” it was a bluff. They had no witnesses. By basing the charge on Jesus’ testimony, Caiaphas violated the 14<sup>th</sup> law:

*#14 A person could not be condemned on the basis of his own words alone.*

Nevertheless, the members of the Sanhedrin went along with Caiaphas and answered, *“He deserves death”*. In so doing they violated rules #15 through #19:

*#15 A verdict could not be announced at night, only in daytime.*

*#16 In the case of capital punishment, the trial and guilty verdict could not occur at the same time, but had to be separated by at least twenty-four hours.*

*#17 Voting for the death penalty had to be done by individual count, beginning with the youngest, so the young would not be influenced by the elders.*

*#18 A unanimous decision for guilt showed innocence, since it is impossible for 23 to 71 men to agree without plotting.*

*#19 The sentence could only be pronounced three days after the guilty verdict.*

Caiaphas’ outburst fired up the council so much so that some became violent and took out their emotions on Jesus:

*MATTHEW 26:67 (ESV)*

**Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him,**

This violated rules 20 and 21:

*#20 Judges were to be humane and kind.*

*#21 A person condemned to death was not to be scourged or beaten beforehand.*

Punching, slapping and spitting upon were some of the highest indignities a person could suffer under Jewish law. These crimes carried hefty fines. Punching someone was punishable by a fine of four denarii (a denarii is one day's wage). To slap someone was punishable by a fine of 200 denarii. To spit in a man's face was punishable by a fine of 400 denarii, more than a year's salary.

This trial took place between the first night and the first day of Passover. This violated the 22<sup>nd</sup> law:

*#22 No trials were allowed on the eve of the Sabbath or on a feast day.*

These trial records show our Lord was innocent. He went sinless to the cross that He might bear our sin. They also show His courage, dignity and clarity of thought under fire.

The enemies of God fight dirty. God not only allows it, He uses it to accomplish His purposes. For a time evil carries the day and we might be made to suffer, but ultimately evil in all its forms will be defeated and come to an end. We need to keep an eternal perspective. This world is not our home. In this world Jesus told us we would have trouble, but He has overcome the world. We must never compromise in our fight against the world by adopting the weapons of their warfare – lying, intimidating, manipulating, slandering, violence. Like Jesus, we should insist on our rights, but all the while trusting God with our lives.