

3. The second stage of the Jewish trial: Jesus is questioned by Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin (Mk. 14:53-65)

Jesus had just appeared before Annas (the former high priest) for an informal interrogation (Jn. 18:12-24) and now He appears before Caiaphas, the acting high priest (see notes on John 18:13). John, however, gives no specifics about what transpired. The trial is found in Matthew 26:57-68, Mark 14:53-65, and Luke 22:54-71; only Mark will be considered here.

Mark

14:53 They led Jesus away to the high priest; and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes gathered together.

14:54 Peter had followed Him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the officers and warming himself at the fire.

14:55 Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, and they were not finding any.

14:56 For many were giving false testimony against Him, but their testimony was not consistent.

The Sanhedrin was the Jewish political ruling body and the highest Jewish tribunal at the time of Jesus. It consisted of seventy men (plus the acting high priest), composed of the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes. The “whole Council” in verse 55 need not be taken to mean that all seventy-one men were present, but that enough were there to represent the will of the group. Mention of the Sanhedrin also indicates that, unlike the questioning by Annas in John 18, this was a formal trial that was taking place. If both Annas and the Sanhedrin concurred that Jesus was guilty and recommended the death penalty, the action would likely win the acceptance of both the populace and the Romans (Carson, 552). Usually, the Sanhedrin met in a hall on the temple mount, but both John and Mark are clear that this takes place at the high priest’s house.

The chief priests consisted of the acting high priest, those who had been high priests, and members of the privileged families from which the high priests were taken. These individuals were to intercede on behalf of the people of Israel, offer sacrifices for their sin, and guide them in spiritual matters. The elders were the influential families in Jerusalem, and tribal and family heads of the people and priesthood. The scribes were experts in the law (lawyers), Pharisees and Sadducees alike (ISBE). Yet all of these men, supposedly entrenched in the truth, conspired together to put Jesus to death. As representatives of the nation, their actions constitute the formal rejection of their messiah by Israel.

Under Roman rule the Jews were allowed to sentence someone to death, but were not allowed to carry out the sentence; that was a prerogative reserved by Rome alone. Though the Sanhedrin had concluded that Jesus was guilty even before the trial had begun (Mk. 14:55), they needed to go through the proper protocol lest the case be thrown out by the Roman governor, whose approval they needed to have Jesus executed.

Much of what we know about court proceedings in Jesus' day comes from the Talmud, a document composed between 100 AD - 500 AD. Although we cannot be certain that Jewish practices had not changed by the time the Talmud was written, many believe that the same practices had existed for years. The Talmud consisted of two main parts: the Mishnah and the Gemara. The Mishnah contained a digest of all the oral laws supposedly communicated by Moses to the seventy elders, as well as traditions and explanations of scripture. The Gemara was an expanded commentary on the Mishnah that was composed in Aramaic (the spoken language of the Jews).

"The rules of procedure set out in the Mishnah for the judgment of capital cases gave the accused the benefit of the doubt. A verdict of guilty could not be passed immediately, but had to be left over until the following day, and since none of the proceedings could take place at night, on a Sabbath or on a festival day. . ." (Hooker, 555).

"Mark presents the whole scene as a travesty of justice. According to the Mishnah, a trial on a capital charge should begin with a statement of the reasons for acquittal, not with reasons for conviction: here, however, the judges' minds are made up from the outset, since they are determined to put Him to death" (Hooker, 558). Nevertheless, everything falls within the plan of God. Jesus had foretold that "the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed. . ." (Mk. 8:31). He also said in Mark 12:10-12 that "the stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone;" they understood that He was speaking against them.

14:57 Some stood up and began to give false testimony against Him, saying,

14:58 "We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands.'"

14:59 Not even in this respect was their testimony consistent.

According to OT law, at least two, but preferably three witnesses were necessary before imposing the death penalty (Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:6; 19:15). In a trial, witnesses acted as the prosecution who presented their evidence before the judges and the accused. Here, witnesses claim that Jesus said He will destroy the temple. Destruction or desecration of places of worship was considered a capital offense (Lane, 534).

The background of their claims is found in John 2:19-21. When the Jews had asked for a sign Jesus said, "Destroy the temple and in three days I will raise it up." Though John tells us that Jesus was speaking of the temple of His body, no one who heard Jesus would have known that. Thus, the comment in Mark 14:58 is somewhat true; Jesus had spoken of destroying the temple. But what Jesus is actually being accused of is false; He was never going to desecrate anything sacred.

According to Jewish law, if the witnesses disagreed in even trivial details their testimony was considered inadmissible as evidence (Lane, 533); Mark specifically states that the evidence they presented did not agree on any one point. Due to the inconsistencies of the witnesses, the evidence should have been thrown out. But the mention of false testimony may be the fulfillment of Psalm 27:12 that states, "Do not deliver me over to the desire of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me. . ."

In another case of irony, the Jews who accused Jesus of threatening to destroy the temple turn out to be the ones who destroy it; it is because of their rejection of Jesus that divine judgment fell upon the nation and the temple ended up being destroyed by Rome in 70 AD.

14:60 The high priest stood up and came forward and questioned Jesus, saying, "Do You not answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?"

14:61 But He kept silent and did not answer. Again the high priest was questioning Him, and saying to Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?"

Because the witnesses didn't achieve the desired result, Caiaphas himself decided to question Jesus. Jesus, however, saw no reason to answer him for no charge had been sustained.

His silence fulfilled Psalm 38:13-14: "But I, like a deaf man, do not hear; and I am like a mute man who does not open his mouth. Yes, I am like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth are no arguments." It also matches the description of messiah in Isaiah 53:7: "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.*" Peter says, "while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Pet. 2:23).

Frustrated by Jesus' silence, Caiaphas cuts to the point: "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" "Blessed One" is circumlocution (a roundabout or indirect way of speaking) meaning "God." Thus, "Are you the son of the Blessed One?" means "Are you the Son of God?"

In the OT "the son of God" was a title applied to the kings of Israel (II Sam. 7:14; Psa. 2:7; 89:26-27) for the king was the one instituted by God to discharge His divine authority. It also was a messianic title. Grammatically, "son of the Blessed One" is in apposition to "Christ;" that is, they are terms that describe the same individual (Lane, 535).

Modern Bible students know that when the title "Son of God" is applied to Christ, it has connotations of deity. However, when the High priest asked Jesus if He was the Son of God, he meant nothing more than "Are you claiming to be the messianic heir of the throne of David?" (Brooks, 243).

"Mark's picture is full of anomalies; the witnesses can't agree; the high priest improperly asks Jesus to respond to charges which have not been substantiated and then accuses Him of blasphemy, even though His words apparently do not constitute blasphemy; the nocturnal gathering of the court and immediate passing of sentence are illegal. . . It is not Jesus who is guilty of breaking the law, but His opponents, who claim to uphold it! Although Jesus is now on trial before the high priest, His accusers will soon be on trial before the Son of Man, and Jesus' announcement of His vindication involves their own condemnation" (Hooker, 357).

14:62 And Jesus said, "I am; and you shall see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING WITH THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN."

Jesus refuses to ignore the question or deny His identity. When asked, "Are you the messiah?" He replies, "I am" (Lane, 536). There is no longer any need to speak of Himself in veiled terminology for His mission is about to come to an end.

"The right hand of power" is another example of circumlocution (see 14:61; Stein, 683) meaning "at the right hand of God." The right hand was the place of highest honor and authority. Jesus is claiming to be the messianic figure in Daniel's vision. Daniel said, "I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed" (Dan. 7:13-14). Psalm 110:1, a messianic Psalm, also says, "The LORD (Yahweh) says to my Lord (Christ): 'Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.'" Someday they would be confronted with the Son of God coming in power to judge; and come to know (i.e. "see," "recognize") the position He holds.

The Sanhedrin understood Jesus' words as an unqualified claim to messianic dignity (Lane, 537).

**14:63 Tearing his clothes, the high priest said, "What further need do we have of witnesses?
14:64 You have heard the blasphemy; how does it seem to you?" And they all condemned Him to be deserving of death.**

Tearing the garment is a sign of grief and alarm, but "in the case of the high priest, it was an official act expressing indignation" (Brooks, 244). Jesus' affirmative answer was evidence to the Sanhedrin that they had won their case. The rhetorical question "What further need do we have of witnesses?" is the high priest's way of saying that Jesus had incriminated Himself.

"Blasphemy" was a term that was very elastic in the first century. Technically, nothing was blasphemy unless the divine name was uttered, but over time it could be applied to anything that dishonored God by diminishing His majesty or depriving Him of His rights (Lane, 538). Although claiming to be the messiah was not a capital offense (Lane, 538), claiming to be at the right hand of God and returning from heaven could be construed as enough to deserve the death penalty; in their thinking it was inconceivable that the true messiah could be abandoned by His followers, a prisoner, and helpless in the hands of His enemies. To claim to be messiah under such circumstances constituted a mockery of the promises of God and was blasphemous (Lane, 536). There was no longer the need to obtain more testimony for everyone present had heard what He had said. Therefore, "they all condemned Him to be deserving of death."

In deep irony it is actually the high priest who is committing blasphemy by reviling the Son of God.

14:65 Some began to spit at Him, and to blindfold Him, and to beat Him with their fists, and to say to Him, "Prophecy!" And the officers received Him with slaps in the face.

Nothing stirred more emotion than blasphemy. Once Jesus was condemned the people acted out against His apparently abhorrent behavior. Spitting on someone and striking the accused were typical gestures of rejection and repudiation (Job 30:10; Num. 12:14; Deut. 25:9; Isa. 50:6; Lane, 539).

Verse 65 reminds us of Isaiah 53:6 and Micah 5:1:

Isaiah 53:6 "I gave My back to those who strike Me, And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting."

Micah 5:1: . . . "With a rod they will smite the judge of Israel on the cheek."

Blindfolding Jesus was a gesture used to mock His claim to be messiah. Isaiah 11:3 says of messiah that "He will delight in the fear of the LORD, and He will not judge by what His eyes see, nor make a decision by what His ears hear." According to some Jewish traditions, this was interpreted as meaning that He would be able to judge by smell without the need of sight. "But here is Jesus, spit on, punched, slapped, blindfolded, and taunted, without displaying any power" (Carson, Matt, 556). The parallel passage in Matthew 26:68 ties this together even more clearly; there they say, "Prophecy to us, *You Christ*; who is the one who hit You?"

Chronologically, it was immediately after this that Peter denied Jesus, and Jesus' prophecy that Peter would deny Him three times before the rooster crowed came to pass.

4. The first stage of the Roman trial: Jesus is questioned by Pilate (John 18)

18:28 Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium, and it was early; and they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium so that they would not be defiled, but might eat the Passover.

John gives more detail to this trial than the other gospels, and wants to show that Pilate saw Jesus as innocent and exonerates Him of the charges. It was the high priestly party that demanded Jesus' crucifixion.

The location of the Praetorium is debated, but it was the headquarters of the Roman government, probably located in Caesarea in a palace built by Herod the Great (cf. Acts 23:33-35). It was also the residence of the governor. But during times of potential trouble, he would go to Jerusalem where he could direct his armies as needed. Passover was one of these times, for it was during Passover that the Jews remembered and celebrated God's deliverance of His people from the Egyptian bondage, and it was at that time when hopes ran high that God would deliver them again.

“Early” was most likely sometime after dawn (6:00 a.m.) for Matthew 27:1 states these events happened “when morning came.” In Jewish law the death sentence was not allowed to be handed down at night which explains why they waited as they did.

The Sanhedrin is a perfect example of what fallen humanity is like. While being unbelievably scrupulous in avoiding ritual defilement, they are involved in the vilest act in human history. While they are delivering the Lamb of God to the slaughter, they are making sure that their hands are absolutely clean. They are paying attention to the finest detail of religion while their hearts are as far from God as they could possibly be. “There is deep irony in the fact that the Jews are scrupulously avoiding ceremonial uncleanness while not being concerned about burdening themselves with the moral guilt of condemning an innocent man to death. Also ironic is that they use a Gentile to achieve their ends, yet will not enter a Gentile’s house” (Brown, II, 866).

Verse 28 creates an apparent conflict with chapter 13. In John 13 Jesus and the disciples had eaten the Passover, but here it sounds like the Passover meal had not been eaten yet: “they would not be defiled, but might eat the Passover.” A couple of suggestions have been made in resolving the problem. Carson is probably correct when he states that “the Passover” refers to the entire Passover festival, including the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Carson, 590). Evidence for this is in Luke 22:1 which says, “Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which is called the Passover, was approaching.” Thomas, however, notes that John viewed the calendar dates from a different perspective than the other gospel writers; the synoptic gospels viewed each day from sunrise to sunrise, while John viewed the events from the standpoint of the Sadducees who controlled the temple and identified a day from sunset to sunset. They were unlike the Pharisees and other Jews, in that they didn’t celebrate Passover until sunset of the next day (Thomas/Gundry, A Harmony of the Gospels, 321-322). Whatever the answer may be, the gist of it is that if the Jews entered Pilate’s courtyard, they would be defiled and could not finish the celebrations. In either case, the “problem” is fairly easily resolved.

18:29 Therefore Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this Man?"

Pilate was the fifth procurator of Judea and was appointed to that position by the emperor Tiberias in AD 26. He held the position until AD 36-37. “The procurator was the personal servant of the emperor, directly responsible to him, and was primarily concerned with finance. But the powers of procurators varied according to the appointment of the emperor. Pilate was a procurator *cum potestate*, i.e. he possessed civil, military, and criminal jurisdiction” (ISBE).

Pilate and the Jews detested each other, but he was very accommodating to the Jewish leaders, going out to see them because they refused to come in. He immediately inquires what the accusation they were making against Jesus was, formally beginning the trial proceedings.

18:30 They answered and said to him, "If this Man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you."

The Jews were agitated by his question. In a Roman court of law they had no charge against Him and they knew it. They had had Pilate's cooperation in arresting Jesus and they probably assumed that once they had convicted Jesus everything else would go smoothly.

They responded by calling Jesus an evildoer; this however, only spoke about His character; it did not state a specific crime which He committed. They were implying that Pilate should just trust their judgment and act. They may have been surprised that Pilate would try the case himself.

18:31 So Pilate said to them, "Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law." The Jews said to him, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death,"
18:32 to fulfill the word of Jesus which He spoke, signifying by what kind of death He was about to die.

Pilate was aware that the Jews lacked real evidence and didn't appreciate their arrogance, so he simply tells them to judge Jesus themselves. He wanted no part of a trial that did not stand up under Roman law, and he could not endure the Jews' generalities about Jesus. However, his initial refusal to cooperate draws out what the Jews really wanted. They were in a dilemma. They wanted Jesus to be executed, but the Romans forbade capital punishment outside of government involvement. The only way that they could legally get rid of Jesus was to have Him executed by Rome. Since the governor could do what he pleased, they wanted him to solve their problem, find Jesus guilty, and execute Him.

As appalling as these events were, the circumstances were divinely orchestrated; they fulfilled the word Jesus had spoken. In John 3:14 Jesus told Nicodemus *how* He would die; He said, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up." Likewise, in John 12:32-33 He said, "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." John remarks that "He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die." If the Jews had killed Jesus, it would not have been by crucifixion for they hated crucifixion; they would have stoned Him for that was the penalty specified in the law for blasphemy. However, God had arranged the cultural circumstances in such a manner that Jesus would die in the way He had predetermined.

18:33 Therefore Pilate entered again into the Praetorium, and summoned Jesus and said to Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?"

Pilate decided to interrogate Jesus himself. Unlike Jewish law, people accused of a crime could be publicly interrogated. During such times the accused could reply to the accusation leveled against him.

Pilate's question may have been somewhat scornful, something like, "You, a prisoner, deserted even by your friends, are king, are you?" (Barrett, 536). Pilate wanted to know whether or not Jesus posed a real threat to the emperor.

18:34 Jesus answered, "Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?"

18:35 Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?"

Jesus' response focused on His accusers. He was aware that "King of the Jews" had more than one definition depending upon one's cultural and religious backgrounds, so He could not answer Pilate's question simply. If Pilate had thought of the question himself, he would have been asking if Jesus saw Himself as a king conspiring against Caesar. If the question was prompted by the Jews, it would have meant, "Are you the messianic king of Israel?" The answer to first question would be "no;" the answer to the second would be "yes."

Pilate answers, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me." In other words, Pilate wasn't a Jew and he could care less about such things; it was the chief priests who had delivered Jesus to him; it was their charge that Jesus claimed to be a king.

Though Pilate doesn't want to be involved in Jewish affairs, he is now forced to (Kostenberger, 528) and so he asks what Jesus has done?

18:36 Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm."

18:37 Therefore Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

Jesus explains that He does have a kingdom, but that kingdom is not part of this world. To make his point He states that He has no military; if He did, He would not have been handed over to the Jews so easily. His kingdom is not like the kingdoms of the world, so Pilate has no reason to execute Him; He is not a threat to Caesar. Nevertheless, He is a king.

"Although God has always had a kingdom upon earth, the kingdom of which the prophets spoke began in its messianic form when the Son of God came in the flesh. John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, came preaching that the kingdom of God was at hand. Our Lord Himself, it is said, went from village to village, preaching the kingdom of God. (Lk. 4:43; 7:1.) . . . The Apostles wherever they went 'testifying about the kingdom of God' (Acts 28:23). Their business was to call upon men to receive the Lord Jesus as the Christ, the anointed and predicted Messiah or king of his people, and to worship, love, trust and obey Him as such. They were, therefore, accused of acting contrary to 'the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus (Acts 17:7). Men are exhorted to seek first the kingdom of God, as a present good (Matt. 6:33). It is compared to a pearl or treasure, for which it was wise for a man to sacrifice everything (Matt. 13:46). Every believer receives Christ as his king. Those who receive Him in sincerity constitute his kingdom, in the sense in which the loyal subjects of an earthly sovereign constitute his kingdom. Those who profess allegiance to Christ as king constitute his visible kingdom upon earth." (Hodge, Systematic Theology, III, 858).

The kingdom has present and future aspects to it just as our salvation is both present and future. When Christ was present, the kingdom was present with Him. Jesus said, "if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28). Colossians 1:13 says that God "rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son." At the same time, Jesus taught the kingdom was future. He told the disciples to pray "Your kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10). He also spoke of "coming in His kingdom" (Matt. 16:28).

Pilate's response, "So You are a king?" can be taken in a number of ways. He may mean, "if you have a kingdom, then you are a king," or he could just be asking a question, or was being sarcastic.

Jesus gives the reason He was born. He came to bear witness and make the truth of God known. All men will be accountable to the truth.

18:38 Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews and said to them, "I find no guilt in Him."

Pilate replies cynically, "What is truth?" Then he concludes there is nothing in Jesus that he can find fault with. The Jews' request is rejected; he will not sentence Jesus to death. But as we shall see, evil does not rest until it has fulfilled its desires.