

“You Shall Appoint Judges”

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake)

Introduction:

- A. In the New Testament, one organization is considered extremely corrupt and villainous; it is the epitome of good leadership gone bad.
 - 1. It is the organization that found Jesus worthy of death by violating most of its own rules of order
 - 2. It is the first organization to begin persecuting the church
 - 3. We know them as the Sanhedrin
- B. God ordained the Sanhedrin after He delivered Israel from Egypt
 - 1. Num. 11:16-17; Deut. 16:18-20
 - 2. By its own rules if carefully followed, it was the greatest court in all of time, including our own judicial system.
 - 3. What happened?

I. WHAT WAS THE SANHEDRIN?

- A. The word comes from a compound word sūn (together) and hedra (seat). It is from the Greek word sunedrion.
 - 1. It literally means “sitting together; a joint session, the Jewish Sanhedrin, a tribunal, council” (Strong's).
 - 2. Sanhedrin was the name for the highest Jewish tribunal made up of 71 members in Jerusalem, and also for the lower tribunals of 23 members of which Jerusalem had two.
 - 3. Combine the 70 elders with Moses or his replacement to get 71
- B. The Great Sanhedrin or Supreme Council
 - 1. The supreme court of justice among the Jews
 - a. Priests who were represented by the chief priests, numbering 24; represented the spiritual interests of Judah - 1Chron. 24:4, 6; Matt. 27:1; John 7:32; 11:47
 - b. Elders who were heads of the great families and tribes of the people, also numbering 24; representing the secular interests of the people - Matt. 16:21; 21:23; 26:3, 47, 57, 59; 27:1, 3, 12, 20, 41; 28:12; Mark 8:31; 11:27; 14:43, 53; Luke 9:22; 20:1; 22:52; John 8:9; Acts 4:5, 23; 6:12; 23:14; 25:15.
 - c. The scribes or lawyers who represented the legal and royal interests of the nation and were 18 in number - Matt. 26:3, 57, 59; 27:41; Mark 8:31; 11:27; 14:43, 53; 15:1; Luke 9:22; 20:1; 22:66; Acts 5:21; 6:12; 22:30; 25:15
 - d. A patriarch or president of the Sanhedrin who represented the organization outside of the council. He could be the high priest, but could never be the king
 - e. A second patriarch or vice president who led and controlled the discussions on disputed points.

- f. A sage or daysman (referee) who heard and considered possible cases and determined if they were to be presented to the council. It is believed that Gamaliel was a sage

C. Qualifications of members

1. Very detailed and numerous. The applicant was to be morally and physically blameless. He had to be middle aged, tall, good looking, wealthy, learned (both in divine law and diverse branches of secular sciences (medicine, math, astronomy, idolatry, etc.) to be able to judge in these matters.
2. He was required to know several languages, so that the Sanhedrin might not be dependent on interpreters.
3. The elderly, proselytes, and eunuchs were ineligible; nor could one be chosen who had no children, because they could not sympathize with families.
4. They had to prove they were Israelites and had never played dice, lent money on usury, flew pigeons to entice others, or bought crops in the Sabbatical year.
5. He was required to be a judge in his own home town, to have served in the lesser Sanhedrin, before he could be received as a member.

D. Time of meeting

1. The Sanhedrin sat every day starting after the morning sacrifice until the beginning the evening sacrifice, with the exception of the Sabbath and feast days
2. The order in which they sat: the president sat in an elevated seat; on his right hand sat the vice president; and at his left the sage
3. The members sat on low cushions with their knees bent and crossed, arranged according to age and learning in a semicircle so that they could see each other, and all of them could be seen by the president
4. All members were not required to be present; 23 formed a quorum.

E. Jurisdiction

1. Combined legislative, administrative, and judicial in one body
2. Watch over the purity and quality of the priests; keep family registers of the priests in Egypt, Babylon, and all places where the Jews resided; removed them from office when necessary
3. To try cases of immorality on the part of priests' children, and of all married women accused of infidelity, life and death issues
4. To watch over the religious life of the nation, and to try any tribe accused of having departed from the living God to serve idols.
5. To bring false prophets and heretics to trial and or executed by the court at Jerusalem - Luke 13:3.
6. To see that neither the king nor the high priest should act contrary to the law of God. Alexander Jannaeus and Herod both had to appear before the Sanhedrin for their conduct.
7. To determine whether war was just and to give the king permission to engage the nation.

8. To decide the boundaries of Jerusalem and the Temple since it would become consecrated ground.
9. To appoint lesser regional courts of justice.
10. To regulate the calendar and harmonize the solar with the lunar year. Their jurisdiction was recognized by all the Jews both in Palestine and in foreign lands.

II. HOW DID THEY CONDUCT TRIALS AND DELIVER PUNISHMENT?

- A. They always acted upon the principle that the accused was innocent till he could be proven guilty. Therefore, the Sanhedrin was excessively careful in conducting the trial, leaning in the direction of clearing the accused rather than seeking his condemnation
 1. Their axiom was that "the Sanhedrin is to save, not to destroy life."
 2. No man could be tried and condemned in his absence (John 7:51)
 3. At the beginning of each trial, the patriarch solemnly admonished the witnesses, pointing out the preciousness of human life, and asking them to carefully and calmly reflect on whether they had overlooked some circumstances which might favor innocence of the accused.
 4. If a member of the Sanhedrin said he thought the accused was innocent during the trial, he could not find him guilty at the end
 5. Before his execution, an anesthetic was administered to the condemned to lessen the pain (Matt. 27:48; Mark 15: 23, 36; Luke 23:36; John 19: 29, 30).
 6. Property of the executed was not confiscated, but passed to his heirs.
 7. The Sanhedrin was restricted to four modes of taking life: stoning, burning, beheading, strangling. However, according to John 16:31, it was not lawful for them to put anyone to death without the confirmation of the Roman procurator; the Jews had no power to carry the sentence of the Sanhedrin into execution
- B. Laws of the Sanhedrin Regarding Trials:
 1. There was to be no arrest by religious authorities that was effected by a bribe - Ex. 23:8
 2. There were to be no steps of criminal proceedings after sunset.
 3. Sanhedrin members were not allowed to participate in the arrest.
 4. There were to be no trials before the morning sacrifice.
 5. There were to be no secret trials, only public.
 6. Sanhedrin trials could only be conducted in the Hall of Judgment of the Temple Compound.
 7. The procedure was to be first the defense and then the accusation.
 8. All may agree on acquittal, but all may not argue in favor of conviction.
 9. There were to be two or three witness and their testimony had to agree in every detail - Deut. 19:15.
 10. The accused could not testify against himself.
 11. The High Priest was forbidden to rend his garments - Lev. 21:10
 12. Charges could not originate with the judges; they could only investigate charges brought to them.

13. The accusation of blasphemy was only valid if the name of God was pronounced (and heard by 2 witnesses).
 14. A person could not be condemned on his own words alone.
 15. The verdict could not be announced at night, only in the daytime.
 16. In cases of capital punishment, the trial and guilty verdict could not occur at the same time but must be separated by at least 24 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 shows innocence since it is impossible for 23-71 men to agree without plotting.
 19. The sentence could only be pronounced the day after the verdict.
 20. Judges were to be humane and kind.
 21. A person condemned to death was not to be beaten beforehand.
 22. No trials are allowed on the eve of the Sabbath or on a feast day.
- C. Laws the Sanhedrin broke in order to secure a guilty verdict for Jesus
1. The council bribed Judas Iscariot - Matt. 26:14-16
 2. The criminal proceeding happened throughout the night - Matt. 26:40, 45, 57-75
 3. Chief priests, elders, and scribes took part in the arrest - Mark 14:43
 4. The trial was before morning sacrifice
 5. John 18:16 says Peter stood outside the courthouse at the courtyard with others. The public was restricted from full access
 6. The trial did not take place in the Hall of Judgment or Temple Compound. It took place in a house - Luke 22:54
 7. In none of the Gospel accounts was Jesus given a defense procedure prior to their accusations and the trial's false witnesses.
 8. All argued in favor of conviction - Matt. 26:59
 9. The testimonies of the witnesses are all thrown out by the Sanhedrin - Mark 14:55. Then two witnesses said that they had heard Jesus say that he will destroy the Temple and rebuild it in 3 days. Mark 14:59 says even these two testimonies did not agree.
 10. Jesus testifies against Himself by keeping silent as the witnesses bore false testimonies. Jesus MUST answer to this accusation to fulfill the requirements of the Sanhedrin. Also, to claim to be the son of God (in Hebrew, it means a righteous person) and/or Messiah is not a crime in Mosaic law, and therefore a blasphemy sentence cannot be achieved
 11. The high priest's tore his garments - Matt. 26:65.
 12. The initial charges in Mark 14:56-64 were not the ones acted on. The charge acted on was the one initiated by the high priest and not the ones brought forth from the witnesses.
 13. Jesus did not pronounce the name of God (YHWH) and therefore did not blaspheme.
 14. One cannot be condemned based on his words alone. Jesus was condemned based on His testimony.
 15. The trial and verdict was at night before the rooster had crowed.

16. The trial and verdict was all done within the same night, therefore, violating the 24 hour gap rule.
 17. The high priest announced the verdict initially, and not in order from youngest to oldest.
 18. A unanimous decision in the Sanhedrin can only equal innocence, since an entire council of 23-71 men cannot agree together without illegal plotting. The council was unanimous; therefore, Jesus would have been let free and not convicted
 19. The council immediately brought Jesus to Pilate in Mark 15:1, and the crucifixion took place in the third hour of the same day - Mark 15:25
 20. The judges, elders, and scribes had beaten the Messiah throughout the trial, mocked Him, and later followed Him to the crucifixion, mocked Him more, made a crown of thorns, etc.
 21. Mark 14:65 - Jesus was blindfolded and beaten at the courthouse.
 22. Mark 14:14 indicates that it was Passover.
- D. Therefore, the trial of Jesus, according to the Gospel accounts, violated 22 of the 22 conditions of a fair trial. Traditionally, in Judaism, a trial is thrown out if one condition was violated; but in Jesus' case, they violated the entire structure of His trial and sentence.

III. WHY DID THE SANHEDRIN WANT JESUS DEAD?

- A. Jealousy - They wanted to hold onto power and considered Jesus a threat to it
Luke 20:1-2; John 8:51-59
- B. Jesus was teaching things they believed were heretical, and rather than re-examining their conclusions, they wanted to eliminate the One who questioned them - Luke 20:19-20
- C. Jesus addressed the failures of the priesthood with logic and zeal - Matt. 23
- D. Jesus was popular with the people drawing thousands of disciples - Luke 4:15
- E. Jesus did not come to be the king they wanted Him to be. They wanted someone to liberate them from Rome - John 6:15
- F. Jesus told them He was the Messiah. Though not against the Law of Moses, it greatly offended the Sanhedrin - Mark 14:61-63
- G. He was exposing them to the people as frauds and liars - John 7:26
- H. They were afraid Jesus would incite the Roman armies to increase militarization to avoid a Jewish insurrection - John 18:13-14

Conclusion:

- A. They corrupted the finest judicial institution in the world to avoid the consequences of Jesus' mission in this world.
- B. Don't you dare judge the Sanhedrin! What are you squandering in order to avoid Him and your duty to Him?