



THE

TRIAL



OF



CHRIST

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BY ELDER CREE-L KOFFORD

**I** invite you to investigate  
*with me a trial of tremendous significance that occurred in the  
meridian of time and about which one noted authority wrote,  
“The pages of human history present no stronger case of judicial  
murder than the trial and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth.”*

It is my hope that examination of this event will help you to come closer to our Heavenly Father and His Son Jesus Christ.

We all know the great miracles the Savior performed, but most of us have trouble knowing and understanding the Savior when He walked on water or raised the dead to life because we have never done these things. Nor do we fully understand how He bled at every pore or how He took our collective sins upon His shoulders. But as I glimpse Jesus in an environment (legal) that I thoroughly understand, I am able to carry that into an area that I do not understand.

The trial of Christ occurred while Rome controlled the land of Palestine. Rome was represented at the trial by two men: Pilate and Herod. Pilate was the man to whom Jesus would ultimately be taken for the final phase of the trial. He was a man who had earned the enmity of the Jews: he flaunted the image of the Roman emperor in sacred places of the Jews and usurped money from the temple treasury. At one time they petitioned Rome to have him removed. Pilate was both a powerful and an impotent ruler. If his subjects rose in rebellion against him, he would be recalled, and he knew it. That will become important.

meet him is 70 years old. He had been the chief priest—a position like the chief justice of the Supreme Court, the speaker of the House, the president pro temp of the Senate, and the president of the United States all rolled into one. He was absolutely unscrupulous and unprincipled.

Caiaphas is the other name to remember. Caiaphas was Annas' son-in-law. He was of the same disposition as Annas, but not nearly as smart. At this particular time, he was the chief priest.

The trial was conducted before the Great Sanhedrin, a body of 72 men who sat only in Jerusalem. To be a member of the Great Sanhedrin was an honor. Membership required that a man be Hebrew, speak multiple languages, and be upstanding in the community. He had to be honest and without guile. You will see that what was supposed to be and what really was were two different things.

The evidentiary and procedural rules used in the Great Sanhedrin were unusual by today's standards. First of all, there were no lawyers, no advocates, and no prosecuting attorneys. An indictment was made when two witnesses gave the same incriminating evidence. To be a witness you had to

One interesting application of Jewish law was that if you voted for acquittal the first day, you could not reverse your vote and vote for conviction the second day. However, you could do the opposite.

Another requirement specified that between the first and second days of the trial, the members were supposed to talk about the case while walking home. They were to assemble in small groups and further discuss the case. They were to dine lightly and pray and ponder the situation and again meet just before bed to discuss the case once again.

The law and the facts that applied in the trial of Christ came from two sources: the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) and the Talmud. The Talmud consists of the Mishna, which is the written code of the Hebrews, and the Gemara, which was the unwritten code eventually reduced to writing. Today we would describe the Gemara as *corpus juris*—an encyclopedia of Jewish law. To give you some idea of size, one writer estimates that if it were reduced to English, the Gemara would consist of 400 volumes, each volume having 360 pages.

The facts of the trial of Christ all come from one fundamental source: the four Gospels of the New Testament. Factually, that's all we have upon which to base our examination.

With this background in place, let us now go to the trial itself. Christ had left the upper room. The sacrament of the Last Supper had been taken, the washing of feet had been conducted, and Judas had been told to do that which he was to do quickly and had left, as one writer said, to perform his nefarious activity. Christ had taken the 11 disciples who were left and had journeyed out of Jerusalem. The city gates, normally closed, were left open during the Passover to allow ingress and egress by the vast crowd gathered at Jerusalem for the festivities. He went down over the small creek of Cedron and up the hill to the Garden of Gethsemane. What transpired in that sacred place changed the history of all mankind and brought hope to those who before had held none.

Emerging from the Garden, Christ said to his disciples, "Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners" (Matthew 26:45). As he said that a

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The other man you need to know about is Herod, the tetrarch of Galilee; he, too, was hated by the people. It was his father, Herod the Great, who had caused the slaughter of all children less than two years of age when Christ was born. Herod is the only person in recorded history to see Christ face-to-face and never hear His voice.

As a general rule, Rome was very tolerant of local citizens governing themselves. However, its leaders reserved for themselves the right to pass the death sentence. So, at the time of which we are speaking, Jews could not pass the death penalty; all they could do was refer such a case to the Romans.

You also need to know a little bit about the Jews. Two Jewish leaders became especially important during those fateful hours. The first was Annas, who at the time we

be Hebrew. You could not be a woman, nor could you be immoral. In order for a person to be a witness, they had to be an eyewitness to the entire act on which the charge was based—which is different from the permissible partial witness system we use today.

As you see, the Sanhedrin operated under an interesting set of rules. Procedurally they had a set regimen that had jurisdictional implications. At the beginning of each day, the morning sacrifice was offered. The judges would then assemble, witnesses were examined, and debate and balloting occurred. At that point in a criminal case of capital nature (wherein the death penalty could be imposed), it was required that the trial be recessed. The judges all went home. The next morning they met again, and after the morning sacrifice they revoted.

band or cohort came through the gates of Jerusalem. Though some distance away, the light from the torches glistened upon the shields and swords of the Roman legions that were with the Jews. Christ stood calmly and waited for them to come.

Judas came forward and, with betrayal in his heart and a smile on his lips, kissed the Savior on the cheek, saying, "Hail, master" (v. 49). With kingly bearing, the Savior responded, "Betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss?" (Luke 22:48). The signal had been given, the object of their conspiracy identified.

In spite of this, the hardened soldiers stood transfixed. Perhaps they wondered: "Can He really cause the blind to see? Can He really raise the dead to life? Can He really perform miracles?" With their superstitious nature they must have been concerned about these things, for they did not make a move toward Christ.

Christ's voice rang into the night, "Whom seek ye?" (John 18:4). A voice from the crowd answered, "Jesus of Nazareth." He said, "I am he" (v. 5). Several fell to the ground, others stepped back, and there was no effort to advance. The second time His voice rang out with clarity: "Whom seek ye?" Again the answer came: "Jesus of Nazareth" (v. 7). "I have told you that I am he: if therefore ye seek me, let these go their way" (v. 8).

The soldiers finally mustered their courage, came forward, bound an obedient and submissive Christ, and led Him away, but not before Peter pulled his sword and struck the ear from Malchus, the servant of the chief priest, not before His followers had some idea of the awful events they would see on this fateful night.

Eventually Christ was sent bound to Caiaphas, the chief priest. It was there, I believe, that the formal trial of Christ began. Caiaphas was in the assembly of the Sanhedrin. Where it met or how many there were I do not know. But there is no doubt in my mind that there was a Great Sanhedrin, that it met on that night, and that it exercised unholy jurisdiction over Christ in furtherance of its own conspiracy.

As we examine the actual trial, keep in mind that there was no indictment. There was no reading of a charge. There was simply the calling of witnesses. The scriptures say that the Sanhedrin set about to find false wit-



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nesses who would bear testimony against the Savior. Witness after witness came, but no two witnesses agreed. Finally two came, one of whom said, “This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days” (Matthew 26:61). The second witness reported hearing Christ say, “I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands” (Mark 14:58). Note that one said, “I am able,” and the other said, “I will.” The disparity in the testimony needs no comment. That was the best Caiaphas could do. It was early in the morning, and the feast day was coming; they were going to have to go with whatever testimony they had.

At this point Caiaphas turned to Christ—who was standing quietly, listening to the charade—and uttered the first words recorded in the trial transcript: “Answerest thou nothing? what is it which these witness against thee?” (Matthew 26:62). To this question Christ responded, “In secret have I said nothing. Why asketh thou me? ask them which heard me, what I have said unto them” (John 18:20–21). At that moment a Roman standing next to the Savior smote Him across the face, to which the Son of man replied, “Why smitest thou me?” (v. 23).

The situation had not gone well for Caiaphas: the two witnesses were weak, and he knew it; the testimony was weak, and he knew that. In a moment of desperation, Caiaphas rose from his judicial bench, rent his judicial robe, and said in a loud, perhaps profound voice, “I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God” (Matthew 26:63).

Christ’s answer was, “Thou hast said” (v. 64), meaning, “I am what you say.” Caiaphas looked triumphantly at the Sanhedrin and said, “He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? behold, now ye have heard his blasphemy. What think ye?” (vv. 65–66). Then the Sanhedrin as one voice responded, “He is guilty of death” (v. 66). In obedience to the legal requirement that no capital case be heard in a single day, Caiaphas adjourned the Sanhedrin. Christ was given to those who were his captors. He was smitten about, spat upon, and mocked. The Sanhedrin departed for a short time and reconvened early in the morning.

As the second session began, Caiaphas, in violation of all procedural safeguards,

began with a question to the Master: “Art thou the Christ?” (Luke 22:67). The Savior responded, “If I tell you, ye will not believe: . . . nor let me go” (vv. 67–68). For the second time, Caiaphas says, “What need we any further witness? for we ourselves have heard of his own mouth” (v. 71). The Great Sanhedrin confirmed the triumph of their leader with the words “He is guilty of death” (Matthew 26:66). Thus ended the short record of the clearest case of judicial murder in the pages of history: the trial of Jesus of Nazareth before the Jews.

Caiaphas had the victory in his hands, but he didn’t have the power to kill Christ. He knew that if he went to the Romans and said, “This man claims to be God,” the Romans would have yawned and said, “No problem. We are a very liberal thinking group, we have gods for everything, and we’ll just put him on the mantle with all of our other gods.” Caiaphas knew that he couldn’t go in with that charge, so he twisted it, endeavoring to convince the Romans that Christ was guilty of treason.

Pilate then met with Jesus and asked, “Art thou the King of the Jews?” (John 18:33). Jesus answered, “Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of me?” (v. 34). Pilate’s response was, “Am I a Jew?” (v. 35). Christ said, “My kingdom is not of this world” (v. 36), and then went on to explain that He came to preach the truth. That led to Pilate’s question: “What is truth?” (v. 38).

When Pilate heard that Christ was a Galilean, he quickly sent Him to Herod, who happened to be at Jerusalem at the time. Receiving no answers from Christ, Herod clothed Him in a purple robe, placed a crown of thorns upon His head, and sent Him back to Pilate. Several times Pilate said, “I find no fault in this man,” but he ultimately turned Christ over to the mob for crucifixion.

Now let us examine the illegalities of the trial of Christ before the Jews. There are at least 12 of them.

First, the arrest of Jesus was illegal according to Jewish law not only because it was conducted at night but because it was brought about with the aid of an accomplice—by the betrayal of Judas Iscariot. Christ’s arrest, similar to those that we see today when search warrants are neglected, should have been a fatal legal flaw in the case against Jesus.

Second, we know according to the record of fact that Christ was interrogated by Caiaphas and/or Annas, who each sat alone in judgment. The law according to the Mishna states, “Be not a sole judge, for there is not a sole judge but one.” Of course, this refers to the Eternal Father. Either Caiaphas or Annas, or perhaps both, each conducted an illegal private examination—a second fatal flaw in the case against the carpenter from Nazareth.

Third, the indictment against Jesus was, in form, illegal. The Sanhedrin did not and could not originate charges; it could only investigate the charges brought before it. The chief priest and all of the council sought for a witness against Jesus to put Him to death. “For many bare false witness against him, but their witness agreed not together” (Mark 14:56). The gospel records disclose two distinct elements of illegality: the indictment was vague and the accusation was made in part by Caiaphas, who illegally questioned the witness.

Fourth, the trial was conducted at night. Several sources of law essentially say, “A capital offense can be tried during the day, but must be suspended at night.” The Old Testament—the Pentateuch recital of why the law is what it is—explains that this is because you see things more clearly in the day. So a court had no jurisdiction if it convened and acted at a time forbidden by law.



Fifth, the morning sacrifice was not offered. The law simply states that the morning sacrifice was a procedural jurisdictional necessity.

Sixth, the trial was illegal because it was conducted on the day preceding a Jewish Sabbath. There are two reasons why this day is significant. One is the requirement that a trial be stopped and adjourned for a night and started the next day. If a trial began on a day preceding a holiday, it meant that it had to conclude on the holiday, which was illegal. The other reason is that the penalty in a capital case had to immediately follow the judgment, and you could not put someone to death on a feast day or a holiday.

Seventh, the trial of Jesus concluded within just one day. Christ’s arrest occurred at one or two o’clock in the morning, and He was taken to Pilate as the morning sun broke over the horizon. The trial took place in about a six-hour period. Yet Hebrew law required that before an accused could be condemned to death, a night had to intervene.





  
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 WELL HAVE CALLED  
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Eighth, the sentence of condemnation by the Sanhedrin was illegal because it was based upon Christ's uncorroborated confession. Jewish law held, "We have it as a fundamental principle of our jurisprudence that no one can bring an accusation against himself." By such principle, Christ should not have been convicted for any crime.

Ninth, the verdict of the Sanhedrin was unanimous. One writer said, "If none of the judges defend the culprit, i.e., all pronounce him guilty, having no defender in the court, the verdict of guilty was invalid and the sentence of death could not be executed." The reason behind this rule is: If you're tried and everybody in the room is against you, then there must be a conspiracy, because that many people can't all agree on one thing. There was indeed a conspiracy, and, therefore, when all voted against Christ, He should have been set free.

Tenth, the proceedings against Jesus were illegal because (1) the capital sentence was pronounced in a place forbidden by law, (2) the high priest rent his clothes, and (3) the balloting was irregular. Regarding the third point, the judges in the Sanhedrin were supposed to stand and vote one by one. Yet in the trial of Christ they spoke, the scriptures say, as one voice pronouncing, "He is guilty of death!" There was no individual voting, and, therefore, the court was deprived of jurisdiction.

Eleventh, members of the Great Sanhedrin were legally disqualified to try Jesus. As mentioned earlier, they were supposed to be men of integrity; they were supposed to be without guile toward the prisoner. In other words, they were supposed to be impartial, but they were not.

Twelfth, the condemnation of Jesus was illegal because the merits of the defense were not considered. The law required that they should "enquire, and make search, and ask diligently" (Deuteronomy 13:14). They did not. The body of documentary (scriptural) and eyewitness testimony supporting the claim that Christ was in fact the Christ, the Son of God, is both substantial and compelling. Failure to investigate such testimony constituted judicial error of a fatal nature.

So ends our glimpse into the most infamous trial in the history of the world. Corrupt jurors, perjured testimony, judicial conspiracy, and more were present that night almost two thousand years ago. The innocent, sinless Son of God was found guilty of claiming to be the Son of God. The charge of blasphemy before the Jews was deftly turned into the charge of treason before the Romans. Justice was trampled that night. We have called it a trial; we could as well have called it judicial murder.

Could Christ have stopped the process? Without a doubt. After all, He had the power to call down legions of angels. With a

word the powers of heaven could have been summoned, the conspirators dispatched, and Christ set free. But how then could the purpose for which He came to earth have been brought to pass?

The submissive Christ allowed the hateful Sanhedrin, the priest-driven mobs, and even the conquering Romans to carry out their evil designs—all so that the Atonement might be wrought and through it the gift of life everlasting and the hope of eternal life be given to each of us.

As one trained as an advocate before the courts of men, I am filled with love, gratitude, and admiration for Him who will stand as my Advocate before the courts of God. He is the Savior of the world, our Exemplar, our Brother, and our Advocate with the Father.

To you who will one day sit in the courtrooms of the world, it is my prayer that you will never stand in a courtroom without remembering, for just a moment, that night some two thousand years ago when Christ stood in the courtroom from which came eternal life.

#### ART CREDITS

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