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Christ and the Kangaroo Courts

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Select Passages.*[1] *Jesus faced three religious and three civil trials. So strong was the desire to execute Him that all six trials ended within 12 hours. Arrested late Thursday night of Passover, He was condemned the next morning, and died that Friday afternoon.

It was through a series of unjust trials that the Messiah was killed. Yet, through these, we can rejoice that God's plan of salvation was fulfilled.

Sir Edward Coke (1552-1634) was a prolific Englishman whose writings on law became foundational throughout the world for three-hundred years. In *The Institutes of the Laws of England*, he writes: "The law, that is the perfection of reason, cannot suffer anything that is inconvenient." In other words, law is inherently rational, never tolerating inconsistencies.

When Jesus was arrested and tried, "inconsistent" is what we find. Two of the world's greatest systems of law, Roman and Jewish, coalesced in a series of trials that utterly failed. Their application was riddled with inconsistencies in order to condemn a just man.

What were the charges against Jesus? There were none prior to His arrest. The Sanhedrin led by Caiaphas was comprised of Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes—all leaders whom Jesus had rebuked for their hypocrisy (cf. Matt 23). He claimed to be the messiah and became a sensation throughout the region. The Sanhedrin was less than pleased. Others had claimed to be the messiah, and revolts against Rome always followed.

If an uprising was great enough, it meant the authorities of that region were ineffective. Emperor Tiberius wouldn't stand for it. The Sanhedrin could be eliminated, and his appointed Governor replaced. If Judea erupted in violent protest, Pilate feared losing his job; Caiaphas and his colleagues feared for their lives (cf. John 11:49-50).

The week was Passover. Jesus had entered Jerusalem amid palms waving and praises singing by hundreds of thousands. Anything could happen.

FOUR GOSPELS, ONE JESUS

All four Gospels focus heavily on Jesus' final week, but each gives us a different account. John's Gospel, for instance, says little about Caiaphas, but far more about Pilate. Matthew tells us much more about Caiaphas, and Luke's Gospel is the only one that mentions Jesus' trial with Herod Antipas. How do we account for all these differences? By harmonizing them.

We shouldn't expect a linear account of all that happened in the life of Jesus Christ. Matthew's Gospel was written to show Jesus as the long-awaited king, while Mark shows Him more as the suffering servant. Luke clearly reveals the Messiah's humanity, while John emphasizes Jesus' deity.

> THE GOSPELS ARE NOT DETAILED BIOGRAPHIES ON THE LIFE OF JESUS. EACH IS A TESTIMONY, AND WHEN HARMONIZED, THE FOUR BLEND TOGETHER AS THE INSTRUMENTS OF A SYMPHONY.

The four Gospels aren't contradictory but complementary to one another. They give us a fuller picture of the messiah, and it's not hard to sew the pieces of each together. What happened the night of Jesus' betrayal? When He was arrested and stood on trial, here's what the four Gospels tell us…

RIDDLED WITH ERRORS

1) JESUS' DEPOSITION BY ANNAS (JOHN 18:13-27)

A cohort of 600 soldiers apprehended the Lord around midnight, bound and escorted Him to the home of Annas to be interrogated. No charges were provided at the arrest, and none were found by Annas though he was a former high priest and an expert in Jewish law.

When prodded to say something, Jesus only said that Annas should ask the thousands who heard Him teach: "Why do you ask Me?" (cf. John 18:20-21). In other words: *Annas, are you asking Me to incriminate Myself when you know our law forbids it? Call witnesses to testify.* Annas refused to be corrected, and Jesus was brutally struck by a soldier (cf. John 18:22-23).

According to the Jewish Mishnah, a legitimate court could never have a single judge.[2] Multiple judges protected the accused against bias and error. Annas, however, judged alone. Though ousted by the Romans nearly 20 years prior, it seems he was still a powerful member of the Sanhedrin. The irony is that Annas wasn't even qualified. He shouldn't have been a member of this Jewish body, let alone pass judgment on a capital case.[3]

Does it raise a red flag that Jesus met with Annas in the dead of night? It was midnight or 1AM. All Judea slept during the unannounced proceeding. Annas didn't find anything, so he sent Jesus to his son-in-law, Caiaphas, and the inconsistencies only continued to mount.

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2) TRIED BY THE SANHEDRIN

Caiaphas was the official high priest and a master politician who held office from 18-36 A.D. While Jesus met with Annas, Caiaphas was busy calling a quorum of the Sanhedrin into session—23 of its 71 members. They met at his home possibly around 2AM to begin Jesus' official trial. (cf. Matt 26:57-61; John 18:28).

Though he procured "witnesses", Caiaphas became unnerved that their stories didn't agree. Witnesses were necessary to convict, and dismissing them would acquit Jesus. As a last-ditch effort, Caiaphas invoked an oath: "I adjure you by the Living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus had been silent, and only now did He respond saying, "You have said so."

The Lord confirmed His identity and then warned everyone present: "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" (cf. Matt 26:59-64). The Sanhedrin was judging the Judge of Heaven and Earth, and no one had any idea of his peril. The ice couldn't have been thinner when Christ warned: *This isn't the last time you'll see Me.*

Caiaphas didn't care. He tore his robes in a sanctimonious fit of rage and charged Jesus with blasphemy (cf. Matt 26:65). He dismissed the need for outside witnesses and called for a vote. It was unanimous: Jesus was guilty (cf. Matt 26:63-66; Mark 14:53-64). Some left their seats to spit upon, strike, and mock Him (cf. Mark 14:65; Luke 22:63-65).

Overall, the defendant testified, the Sanhedrin witnessed, the high priest charged, and the whole body condemned. Reading the accounts, it's easy to see that the Sanhedrin convened not to try a case, but to find a charge, and it doesn't take a legal expert to see some of the inconsistencies. The location of the trial was in the comfort of Caiaphas' own home.[4] Witnesses were paid to testify, and when their testimony didn't hold up, the court produced a charge in the middle of the trial itself. The defendant's defense of being the Christ wasn't weighed,[5] and He was condemned on the basis of His own words.[6]

The Sanhedrin had also ruled unanimously to condemn Jesus. Unlike the American justice system, ancient Israel always acquitted if a verdict was unanimous. Unanimity among the judges didn't confirm guilt but suggested a conspiracy.

There were no lawyers. When the Sanhedrin considered a case, at least some of the judges were expected to advocate for the accused. In a room of at least 23 judges (perhaps many more), no one spoke in Jesus' defense. Every judge voted with Caiaphas to condemn Jesus of blasphemy. Though the ruling was legally invalid for so many reasons, the show went on.[7]

3) VERDICT CONFIRMED BY THE SANHEDRIN

The ancient Jews were judicially meticulous, exercising great care, and they were very reluctant to take life.[8] For capital cases, they used a two-trial system. If the first trial resulted in a guilty verdict, the Sanhedrin would reconvene for a second trial as a check-and-balance. At least a day between trials was required so the judges could fast and pray while reviewing the case. The point is that capital punishment was taken seriously.

The Sanhedrin under Annas or Caiaphas cared little about life and justice. With Jesus, the most august body in all Judaism had arrested a man without charges, convicted Him without witnesses, and condemned Him on the basis of His own testimony. The Sanhedrin reconvened not after a day of reflection but within a sleepless hour or two. Dismissing all inconsistencies with the first verdict, the judges voted unanimously once again. At this point, Jesus was officially sentenced to death (cf. Luke 22:66-71).

Convicted of blasphemy by one court, the Lord would be convicted of treason by the next. Inconsistent? Utterly. Yet, through the breakdown of two great legal systems, Christ died that you might live.

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[1]See: Walter Chandler, *The Trial of Jesus: From a Lawyer's Standpoint* (Norcross, GA: Harrison Company, 1908; reprint, 1976).

[2]Mishnah. See: Pirke Aboth IV.10: "Judge not alone, for none may judge alone except One."

[3]Annas was partial, an accomplice to bribery, and judged a capital case without any witnesses (cf. Deut 16:18, 17:6). According to the Mishnah, members of the Sanhedrin must be above reproach, pious, and humble. Annas was none of these.

[4]Mishnah. See: Sanhedrin IV.1: "Let a capital offense be tried during the day, but suspend it at night."

[5]Mishnah, See: Sanhedrin IV.5: "The judges shall weigh the matter in the sincerity of their conscience."

[6]The Jewish Rabbi Maimonides said, "We have it as a fundamental principle of our jurisprudence that no one can bring an accusation against himself." See: Maimonides, Sanhedrin, IV.2.

[7]The Jewish Rabbi Wise 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."

[8]Mishnah, See: Makkot 1:10: "A Sanhedrin that puts a man to death once in seven years is called destructive." Hyperbole, but statements like this demonstrate great care when taking life. Death sentences were rare.