The Perverted Trial by the Jews
Matthew 26:57-61
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Matthew 26:57-58 describes the events immediately following the arrest of Jesus. Once *"the Roman cohort and the commander and the officers of the Jews, arrested Jesus and bound Him* (John 18:12), Jesus was taken to Jerusalem to stand trial before the Jewish religious leaders, while *"all the disciples left Him and fled"* (Matthew 26:56). These same events are also found in Mark 14:53-65 and in Luke 22:63-64.

The trial of Jesus before the Jewish ruling council in Matthew 26:57-68 is one of two trials of Jesus. While this trial was conducted by the Jews, the second trial was conducted by the Romans (Matthew 27:11-14). This trial was closer to a quickly arranged hearing to determine how the Jews would proceed with killing Jesus.

Neither Matthew, nor any of the other Gospels gives the complete account of these trials of Jesus. John's Gospel focuses more attention on the Roman trial of Jesus, while the Synoptic Gospels give more attention to the Jewish involvement. Taken together, they form a grim picture of the perversion with which the Jewish leaders acted upon in their trial of Jesus.

<u>Jesus arrives at the trial (26:57)</u>

Matthew records that *"Those who had seized Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were gathered together."* However, John 18:13 makes it clear that the Roman cohort and the officers of the Jews *"led Him to Annas first; for he was father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year."* So then, there was a preliminary appearance by Jesus before Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas. John also records what happened when Jesus came before Annas in John 18:19-23. *"The high priest then questioned Jesus about His disciples, and about His teaching. Jesus answered him, 'I have spoken openly to the world; I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together; and I spoke nothing in secret. Why do you question Me? Question those who have heard what I spoke to them; they know what I said.' When He had said this, one of the officers standing nearby struck Jesus, saying, 'Is that the way You answer the high priest?'Jesus answered him, 'If I have spoken wrongly, testify of the wrong; but if rightly, why do you strike Me?'"*

The purpose of Annas' questioning prior to the trial before Caiaphas was "*about His disciples, and about His teaching,"* in order to ascertain the threat that His disciples could pose and what He was teaching that was producing the revolution that the Jews were so concerned about. Jesus answered that His teaching was public for all to hear, implying that He did not instruct His disciples any differently than He taught openly, which prompted a temple officer to strike Him, wrongly considering Him as not being forthcoming with Annas. Jesus calmly appealed for a fair trial in the face of such brutality.

After Jesus rebuked the officer for striking Him, *"Annas sent Him bound to Caiaphas the high priest"* (John 18:24). The reason why John refers to both Annas and Caiaphas as being the *"high priest"* is because Annas was removed as high priest by the Romans in 15 AD, eventually replacing him with Caiaphas in 18 AD. Because this was the actions of the Romans, and since the Jews still considered the high priest's term to be until his death (Numbers 35:25-28), Annas retained the title of high priest.

Luke 3:1-2 identifies the timing of when the ministry of John the Baptist began by referencing Annas and Caiaphas, *"Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness."* We also see Peter and John being brought before Annas and Caiaphas when they were arrested for preaching about Jesus. *"On the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem; and Annas the high priest was there, and Caiaphas"* (Acts 4:5-6).

Therefore, it was because of the great influence of Annas that Jesus was brought directly to him for questioning first. This meeting occurred while the Jewish ruling council was preparing to assemble with Caiaphas. The ruling council conducted the Jewish trial before Caiaphas because he was the high priest that the Romans recognized, and because the Romans would not allow the Jews to execute anyone, the Jews needed the participation of the Romans (cf. John 18:31).

Both of these appearances of Jesus, the preliminary one before Annas and the Jewish one before Caiaphas and the ruling council, occurred while it was still night on Friday morning, the day of the Judean Passover. To have this large group gather in the middle of the night on such a holy day demonstrates the premeditated plan of these Jewish leaders to arrest Jesus and to quickly conduct this trial.

Luke 22:54 reports that the gathering was also where the high priest lived, *"they led Him away and brought Him to the house of the high priest."* It is likely that both Annas and Caiaphas lived with the extended family near the temple. Caiaphas would preside over the trial as high priest and a leading Sadducee (cf. Acts 5:17). The rest of the ruling council were mentioned as *"the scribes and the elders,"* with the scribes generally representing the Pharisees and the elders generally representing the Sadducees. Along with the chief priests, they acted like the highest court of the Jews.

The purpose of such a trial was to bring justice according to the Law of Moses, *"You shall appoint for yourself judges and officers in all your towns which the LORD your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial, and you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, that you may live and possess the land which the LORD your God is giving you"* (Deuteronomy 16:18-20). Yet what the Jews did was unjust in many ways.

Even by their own standards of justice, recorded in the Mishnah in the second century, they wrongly allowed:

1. The examination of Jesus by Annas without witnesses.

2. The conducting of the trial at night.

3. The sentencing on the day of the trial, instead of on a separate day.

4. The conducting of a capital trial on the day before the Sabbath.

5. The introduction of known false witnesses.

6. The direct interrogation by the high priest.

Yet, what would occur was not only wrong by their standards, but it was certainly immoral by God's standards. Most significantly, it was the greatest miscarriage of justice specifically because of the Person who was on trial. Since the Jews' immoral action against Jesus came from their character, they would have been willing to conduct other sinful proceedings beyond this, such as their trial against Paul in Acts 23:1-15. But what set this trial apart from every other human injustice was this was against the Son of God.

Peter attends the trial (26:58)

When Jesus was arrested and bound to be brought to trial, the disciples fled (Matthew 26:56; cf. Mark 14:54; Luke 22:54; John 18:15-18). However, *"Peter was following Him at a distance as far as the courtyard of the high priest."* He sought safety for himself while viewing what transpired with Jesus. He was able to follow the temple guards and Roman soldiers without drawing attention since it was the middle of the night.

While Matthew only mentions Peter, John 18:15-16 tells us that there was another unnamed disciple along with Peter, *"Simon Peter was following Jesus, and so was another disciple. Now that disciple was known to the high priest, and entered with Jesus into the court of the high priest, but Peter was standing at the door outside. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the doorkeeper, and brought Peter in."* This second disciple is commonly considered to be John, the author of the fourth Gospel, who often includes himself anonymously in his account.

John's account also explains how Peter *"entered in, and sat down with the officers to see the outcome."* John also notes how close Peter was to those who had just participated in the arrest of Jesus, *"Now the slaves and the officers were standing there, having made a charcoal fire, for it was cold and they were warming themselves; and Peter was also with them, standing and warming himself"* (John 18:18; cf. Mark 14:54). A charcoal fire would give off limited heat and light and thus Peter would be close to these temple guards.

That Peter follows Jesus at a distance *"into the courtyard of the high priest"* (Mark 14:54), and that he had to be brought into the court by the doorkeeper, via his relationship with the disciple who was known to the high priest, indicates that this trial was conducted in private, rather than in the public setting of the temple. According to Jewish tradition, capital cases required openness so the public and witnesses for the defense could observe them.

The council arranges false testimony (26:59-61)

Both *"the chief priests and the whole council"* are mentioned by Matthew as having convened at the Jewish trial of Jesus. The chief priests are singled out as those who took the responsibility of leading the trial. The *"whole council"* meant that there was a sufficient quorum of twenty-three members present to officially convene,, since it is highly unlikely that Joseph of Arimathea (cf. Mark 15:43; Luke 23:50-53) or Nicodemus (John 3:1; 19:39) participated in this unrighteous court.

The council was supposed to adjudicate the legal proceeding, not initiate charges themselves. So they had to find people to bring the charges against Jesus, which they actively did. The phrase *"kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus to put Him to death"* does not need to mean that they were looking for people who would lie, for they actually believed that Jesus was guilty of blasphemy and was subverting their leadership and the rulers of the Jews on God's behalf. Rather they were eagerly seeking witnesses who would affirm their view that Jesus was a blasphemer.

While they were seeking such testimony against Jesus, *"they were not finding any."* It is clear that they did not lack people who would give the false testimony that they were seeking, *"For many were giving false testimony against Him."* Many Jews sought to please their religious leaders by cooperating with such testimony against Jesus. The specific problem the council faced was that *"their testimony was not consistent."* This testimony would be presented to the Romans and if it were inconsistent then their plot would be jeopardized. So they were seeking testimony that could hold up under Roman scrutiny.

After listening to the many false accusations and finding them lacking, they found the minimum requirement of two witnesses who *"came forward, and said, 'This man stated, "I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days."'"* Mark 14:58 puts this charge more directly, *"We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands.'"* As with most religions, the Jews would consider a threat to their temple to be an offense worthy of death.

This charge was clearly false since John 2:19-21 records what Jesus said and what His words meant, *"Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days.' But He was speaking of the temple of His body."* First of all, Jesus did not say that He would destroy the temple. Secondly, He was speaking of His body, which would be raised from the dead on the third day. Even if they misconstrued His words and took them literally, He did not say what they claimed. Ultimately, it was the Romans who would destroy the temple in 70 AD.

Mark 14:59 notes that *"not even in this respect was their testimony consistent."* This may be seen in the difference between Mark's report of the charge and Matthew's report, for each may be quoting one of the two false witnesses. This inability to arrange these witnesses to be consistent with each other meant that this charge could not be used against Jesus.

That this premeditated trial by the ruling council of the Jews could not bring consistent testimony against Jesus is a strong statement about His sinlessness. When the religious authorities of the Jews, with their confused interpretation of the Old Testament, could not create anyone to bring a real charge against Jesus after years of seeking to kill Him, the conclusion must be that He lived a perfect life, free from spiritual blemish.

This stands in contrast to the corrupt trial conducted by corrupt leaders. Matthew makes it clear that they allowed *"many false witnesses,"* and the Law required that *"if the witness is a false witness and he has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother"* (Deuteronomy 19:18-19). These false witnesses were themselves guilty of death per the Mosaic Law and by *"trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus,"* the council was also guilty of death.

The failure of this charge to stand up explains why Caiaphas interjects himself into the proceedings to inquire why Jesus was not responding to these witnesses. He knew they were lacking evidence of Jesus guilt and he would then seek to have Jesus blaspheme in front of the council so that they could all qualify to be witnesses against Him (cf. Matthew 26:62-66).

Conclusion

The Jewish religious leaders took advantage of Judas' betrayal of Jesus by arranging a large crowd of soldiers and temple guards to arrest Him and bring Him back to Jerusalem to be executed by the Romans. The ruling council gathered in the middle of the night on Friday, during the Judean Passover in order to arrange a charge against Jesus to bring Him to the Romans for trial. At this hearing, after Jesus was first brought to Annas, the council met with Caiaphas to formalize their charges with false witnesses. Yet these witnesses continued to give inadequate testimony against Jesus.

The council had an additional problem besides inconsistent testimony, they needed a charge that the Romans would care about. They considered Jesus to be a blasphemer, but the Romans were unconcerned with the religious squabbles between the Jews. This problem would continue throughout the Roman trial before Pilate, where the governor would later say to the members of the council, *"Take Him yourselves and crucify Him, for I find no guilt in Him"* (John 19:6). Therefore, the Jews plotted to kill Jesus by mangling their protocol, putting forth false witnesses who gave inconsistent testimony, all to bring charges that would fail to convince the Roman governor of Christ's guilt.