The Persecution by the Council
Matthew 26:62-68
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After the arrest of Jesus by the Roman cohort and temple guards at Gethsemane, Jesus was brought bound to appear before the Jewish ruling council. He was first brought to Annas, the high priest according to Jewish tradition (John 18:13, 19-23), who then sent Him to Caiaphas, who was the high priest the Romans had installed, to preside over the Jewish trial before the Jewish ruling council.

The trial of Jesus before the Jewish ruling council in Matthew 26:57-68 is one of two trials of Jesus, this one by the Jews, and the second by the Romans (Matthew 27:11-14). John's Gospel focuses more attention on the Roman trial of Jesus, while the Synoptic Gospels give more attention to the Jewish trial of Jesus. All four Gospels taken together tell the story of this trial.

The trial began with witnesses against Jesus (Matthew 26:59-61). These witnesses were recruited by the high priest, Caiaphas, and the ruling council to give false testimony *"so that they might put Him to death."* But they struggled to find adequate false witnesses, since a minimum of two witnesses were required for such testimony. Eventually, two false witnesses came forward to say, *"This man stated, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.'"* This was of course untrue, since Jesus never said He would destroy the temple, and because when He spoke of raising up the temple after it was destroyed, He was referring to His bodily resurrection from the dead (John 2:19-21). Yet "*not even in this respect was their testimony consistent"* (Mark 14:59). The problem of inconsistent testimony required a different approach if they were going to put Jesus to death.

<u>Jesus asked by the high priest (26:62)</u>

Caiaphas takes the matter of the lack of testimony against Jesus into his own hands to accomplish their plot. He could not count on the false witnesses, so he attempted to have Jesus commit blasphemy before the council itself. This is why Caiaphas broke protocol and injected himself into the proceedings by asking, *"Do You not answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?"* What Caiaphas should have done was to reject the testimony out of hand because their testimony was inconsistent. However, he chose to try to force Jesus to answer these liars.

Jesus abstains from answering (26:63a)

One reason that *"Jesus kept silent"* was in order to avoid giving legitimacy to this false testimony that should have been rejected based on its inconsistencies. Instead of speaking, "He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously" (1 Peter 2:23). Jesus felt no need to defend Himself against such false accusations.

A second, more significant reason why *"Jesus kept silent"* was to fulfill 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."* By including this passage in what the Ethiopian eunuch was reading when he asks Philip, *"of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?",* Acts 8:32 makes it clear that Isaiah 53:7 was referring to Jesus.

At this point in Matthew's narrative, only Mark includes Matthew's report on the questioning by Caiaphas about the testimony that Jesus chooses not to answer. John's Gospel is focused upon the appearance before Annas just prior to this and the Roman trial. Luke's Gospel picks up the account with the rest of 26:63 through 26:68, although Luke records the persecution of Jesus in 26:67-68 before Jesus identifies Himself in 26:63-65.

It is noteworthy that unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke 22:54-62 recorded the denial of Jesus by Peter before the Jewish trial before the council and the high priest (Luke 22:66-71). As we have frequently seen, Matthew arranged his material more thematically, to make theological points by where he positions the events. This is another one of those cases, since Luke described the trial as, *"When it was day, the Council of elders of the people assembled, both chief priests and scribes, and they led Him away to their council chamber, saying, 'If You are the Christ, tell us'"* (Luke 22:66-67). This must have happened after Peter's denial of Jesus, which was before daybreak, since *"Jesus had said, 'Before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times'"* (Matthew 26:75), and roosters crow before daylight.

Matthew likely placed the denial by Peter out of sequence in order to contrast the courage of Jesus, affirming His identity and accepting the condemnation and beating, with the cowardice of Peter, who could not affirm his knowledge of Christ to a servant girl. While the appearance of Jesus before Annas was at night, the Jews sought this part of the formal hearing to occur *"when it was day"* in order to have at least part of it occur in the daylight to meet a degree of their legal standard.

Jesus adjured by the high priest (26:63b)

By responding to the silence of Jesus with the words, *"I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God,"* the high priest was not simply asking Him another question. The word adjure (EXORKIZO) had the essence of placing an oath upon Jesus. By adding the phrase *"by the living God,"* the high priest doubled his effort to earnestly and solemnly force Jesus to answer him. Ironically, Caiaphas was unknowingly speaking to the true living God who was before him.

The question that Jesus was asked was specifically designed to charge Him with blasphemy. Putting Him on oath to incriminate Himself was another violation by the high priest of what was proper under Jewish protocol. Yet Caiaphas chose to take over the trial to force Jesus to declare what he knew He would say, therefore making the entire council who had gathered personal witnesses of Jesus' alleged blasphemy.

Mark 14:61 reads *"Again the high priest was questioning Him, and saying to Him, 'Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?'"* This was the equivalent of Matthew's *"Son of God,"* for God was the Blessed One. The phrase *"Son of God"* had been used throughout this Gospel to be the Messiah (Matthew 2:15; 3:17; 11:27; 16:13-20; cf. 2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7). Peter had earlier affirmed who Jesus was, *"He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'"* (Matthew 16:15-16).

Caiaphas would have known that this is what Jesus claimed to be from His earlier public statements to the Jews, *"Do you say of Him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God?'"* (John 10:36). Also, *"For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God"* (John 5:18). The high priest wanted the council to hear these words for themselves so that they themselves would be the necessary witnesses.

Therefore, being placed under this oath, He was forced to answer. If He refused to answer, He would be breaking a legally imposed oath. They would then be able to charge Him with this offense as they continued their interrogation. If He denied being the Messiah, His influence would end, for He would be discredited for being unwilling to say to the council what He had said earlier. In either case, their leadership would then be unchallenged.

On the other hand, if Jesus affirmed being the Messiah, they would charge Him with blasphemy and put Him to death on the basis of Leviticus 24:16, *"the one who blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death."* From their perspective, His blasphemy and death would conclusively prove that He was never the Messiah, for the real Messiah would never blaspheme or be conquered. Once again, their leadership would also be unchallenged. Of course, they never considered any other possibility in their unbelief.

Jesus answers the high priest (26:64)

In spite of Caiaphas having improperly interjected himself to ask this question, Jesus chose to answer it with *"You have said it yourself,"* which is the exact same answer He gave to Judas in Matthew 26:25. This reply is not nearly as ambiguous as many suppose, for Mark 14:62 puts it plainly, *"Jesus said, 'I am,'"* which reflects the absolute declaration of His identity in the manner of Exodus 3:14 and John 8:58, *"Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.'"* Jesus likely said both *"You have said it yourself"* and *"I am"* and there is no question that Caiaphas clearly understood what Jesus said by his response in Matthew 26:65, *"Then the high priest tore his robes and said, 'He has blasphemed.'"*

Jesus then expanded upon His answer in order to clarify that He was Messiah, but in a different way that they considered the Messiah to come. As *"Christ, the Son of God,"* Jesus would transcend any earthly power, *"nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN."* With the second *"you"* being plural, Jesus addresses this passage to the entire council. Revelation 1:7 affirms that all people will see Jesus when He returns, including those responsible for His crucifixion, *"BEHOLD, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him."*

Jesus answered Caiaphas and cited Psalm 110:1, *"The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at My right hand'"* and Daniel 7:13, *"with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming."* Daniel 7:13 was a well-known messianic text among the Jews of Jesus' day and the council could not have missed the Lord's claim to be the Christ. By combining Daniel 7:13 with Psalm 110:1, Jesus effectively declared His identity as having the authority of God by *"sitting at the right hand of power."* He was therefore more than the political and military deliverer they were expecting. Psalm 110:1 would end up as the most cited Old Testament passage in the New Testament. It identifies who Jesus truly is, the Son of God. Ironically, the council thought that they had the power to judge Jesus, but He was the true Judge.

Jesus accused of blasphemy (26:65-66)

The high priest responded to Jesus' words with a Jewish expression of great indignation, the tearing of his robes (cf. Acts 14:14), while declaring *"He has blasphemed!"* This act by the high priest was another sinful deed, *"The priest who is the highest among his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil has been poured and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not uncover his head nor tear his clothes"* (Leviticus 21:10; cf. Leviticus 10:6). The Talmud would later allow this practice when God's name was being defended, but this was an overwrought display of theatrics to declare Jesus guilty.

The charge of blasphemy further proved the high priest understood His claim to have the power of God, which the Jews considered to be blasphemous. His claim to be the Messiah brought further outrage by His claim of unique association with God Himself. Thus the high priest stated, *"What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy."* They all were the witnesses, so the high priest began to press for a verdict by asking the council, *"what do you think?"*

The ruling council agreed with Caiaphas regarding the false charge of blasphemy against Jesus when *"They answered, 'He deserves death!'"* Mark 14:64 indicates this verdict was unanimous, *"And they all condemned Him to be deserving of death."* This further supports the view that neither Joseph of Arimathea (cf. Mark 15:43; Luke 23:50-53) nor Nicodemus (John 3:1; 19:39) were a part of the minimum of twenty-three members of the council that was required to render such a verdict.

The penalty for blasphemy was death by stoning, *"Moreover, the one who blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death; all the congregation shall certainly stone him"* (Leviticus 24:16). But the Jews did not have the authority to execute people under Roman rule, which is why Jesus was killed by Roman crucifixion. In addition, the Old Testament prophesied of the manner of the Messiah's death, *"But He was pierced through for our transgressions"* (Isaiah 53:5). The foretelling of Jesus' death by crucifixion rather than by stoning preceded the Roman empire by seven centuries.

The verdict of blasphemy led to the conclusion by the Jewish council that *"He deserves death!"* But the Romans would not execute Him for blasphemy so when they brought Him to Pilate, they framed it as Jesus made Himself into a competitor to their authority by *"saying that He Himself is Christ, a King"* (Luke 23:2).

Jesus afflicted by the Jews (26:67-68)

In Matthew's account, the council concluded with physical persecution of Jesus, *"Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him."* This was a fulfillment of Isaiah 50:6, *"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."*

However, Luke placed the mocking and beating before the assembly of the council for the hearing and the verdict (Luke 22:66-71). Matthew tended to organize his account thematically, more than chronologically. Matthew builds the theme of the growing injustice against Jesus, but Luke's narrative shows that the verdict of Jesus' guilt was predetermined by the Jews, as they beat Him because they already considered Him guilty before the Jewish trial.

An additional difference is that Luke 22:63 describes that it was *"the men who were holding Jesus in custody"* who *"were mocking Him and beating Him."* In support of Luke's attribution of those beating Jesus being the temple guards, Mark 14:65 tells us, *"And the officers received Him with slaps in the face."* While clearly the temple guards physically assaulted Jesus, it is possible that members of the council also participated. Certainly, the high priest and the council were responsible for the actions of the guards.

All three of the synoptic Gospels include the mocking of Jesus, *"Prophesy to us, You Christ; who is the one who hit You?"* Luke and Mark clarify that Jesus was asked this question because *"they blindfolded Him"* beforehand. Therefore, their taunt was to insult His claim as the Messiah, and His response was consistent with His teaching in Matthew 5:39, *"Do not resist an evil person."*

Conclusion

The righteousness of Christ is on display at the Jewish trial of Jesus, in sharp contrast to the wicked Jewish council and high priest. Jesus fulfilled Isaiah 53:7, *"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,"* while fulfilling all righteousness by responding with truth to the adjurement of Caiaphas. In the face of the unrighteous tactics that the Jews employed to falsely charge Him, Jesus endured physical abuse and insults for our sake. This mocking was part of what the author of Hebrews described as Jesus, *"despising the shame"* (Hebrews 12:2). Our Lord did this not only for our ultimate salvation from sin, but also for faithfulness in this present life, *"For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart"* (Hebrews 12:3).