

TRIAL BEFORE THE JEWS

(Luke 22:54-62; John 18:19-24; Mark 14:55-56, 61-65; Matthew 27: 1-5)
(Wilma McLaughlin)

BACKGROUND

At the Passover, in the upper room, Jesus foretold his betrayal that would take place that very night. In response Peter declared 'Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended'. Jesus went on and plainly stated that Peter would deny him three times before the cock crowed – to which Peter asserted "Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee'. (Matthew 26:31-35). We should not forget that Matthew records that all the disciples declared the same resolve after Peter did.

The sheer number of soldiers accompanying the Pharisees to arrest Jesus, would indicate the Pharisees anticipated the possibility of a skirmish with Jesus and his disciples. His non-resistance when confronted by the soldiers likely confused everyone, including his disciples, but assuredly saved lives, particularly the lives of the disciples.

The garden of Gethsemane is located at the foot of the Mount of Olives. Coming from Gethsemane, Jesus would have entered the city of Jerusalem through the southern gate, or Sheep Gate, for that was the most direct way into town from the Mount of Olives. The gate was called the Sheep Gate because the sheep appointed for sacrifice were brought that way to the temple to be offered for sacrifice. Once in the temple, the sacrificial sheep were presented to the priest for examination, to ensure that they met the requirement for sacrifice, and without spot or blemish. (Leviticus 17:5)

THE TRUTH AND LIES

Jesus would have been led from Gethsemane through the Sheep Gate, and taken before the high priest Annas for examination. This was most likely regarded as a hearing to get evidence to submit later to the Sanhedrin. The hearing took place in the middle of the night, which violated both Jewish and Roman law as far as legality of proceedings.

Jewish law forbade night trials, and capital offenses required two trials, a day apart
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The first high priest that Jesus went before, Annas, was actually the former high priest, and father in law to Caiaphas. The questioning by Annas provided an interval during which members of the Sanhedrin could be summoned from their homes for a meeting.

Though technically the former high priest, Annas was still very influential, regarded like the high priest emeritus. Annas had several sons who succeeded him as high priest, which gave this one family a monopoly on the high priesthood for over half a century. Jewish sources label the regime of Annas as corrupt.

It was common in those days for the houses of extended families to be connected, separated by and surrounding a shared courtyard. This would seem to be the case in the

instance of Caiaphas and Annas. The connectedness of residences would not only be convenient for domestic and family interactions, but would have aided in furthering the continued influence of Annas over decision making by making him easily accessible for situations like interrogating Jesus.

Annas asked Jesus about his disciples and his doctrine, likely hoping to get the confession that Jesus was preparing his disciples for revolutionary activity. Such a confession would have been sufficient to warrant death because of the threat of insurgency against the Roman government. Jesus was silent concerning his disciples, and as for his teaching, Jesus' responded, 'I spoke openly', an assertion that he had no secret plan, nor plot against the authorities. Jesus' bold insistence 'if I have spoken evil, then bear witness' indicated that Jesus knew and was declaring that the procedure was illegal since there were no witnesses.

'At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is worthy of death be put to death; but at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death' Deuteronomy 17: 6

After being questioned by Annas, Jesus was led to the palace of Caiaphas – where the Jews had assembled two days earlier to plot his death. It was before Caiaphas that two false witnesses testified “This fellow said ‘I am able to destroy the temple of god, and to build it in three days’”. When Jesus ‘held his peace’, an exasperated Caiaphas said “I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God.” The use of the wording ‘I adjure thee’ informed Jesus that his response would be regarded as under oath. Jesus' response, “Thou has said” was an unequivocal confession. Caiaphas responded by renting his clothes – or tearing his priestly garment from the top down, indicating that, for him, the matter was decided. Caiaphas then turned to the council (likely a quorum, rather than whole council) declared blasphemy had been committed and asked them for the sentence – which the council pronounced, ‘he is guilty of death’.

'The assembly of the wicked have enclosed me' Psalm 22:16

PETER'S DENIALS

In the meantime, Peter had followed the procession that led Jesus from Gethsemane, and had arrived outside the house of the high priest where Jesus was being questioned. Though Peter did follow 'afar off', nonetheless, Peter was the only disciple, other than John, who did dare to follow. While the other disciples fled into fearful hiding, Peter, though no doubt equally fearful, was drawn to follow his master nonetheless. During this night, as Jesus was being examined before the high priests, Peter faced a trial of his own in the courtyard of the high priest.

“Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, not sitteth in the seat of the scornful' Psalm 1:1

John records (John 18:15-16) some additional details about what transpired as Peter followed Jesus to the palace of the high priest. Typical of John's writings, he refers to himself as 'that other disciple', and does so in this instance as well, namely that, 'that other disciple' who had followed with Peter, went in with Jesus into the palace while Peter initially stood 'without' or outside the door. Scripture states that 'that disciple' was known unto the high priest, which would account for John being allowed to pass into the palace, or courtyard. The palace would have been more like a compound rather than a single structure, with the courtyard in the middle of the residences of Annas and Caiaphas. At some point, 'that disciple' arranged for Peter to be allowed into the palace. It was as the damsel who kept the door admitted Peter, that the damsel accused Peter of being one of Jesus disciples, to which Peter replied, 'I am not'.

Peter's second denial occurred while he stood (John 18:18) and warmed himself with the servants and officers in the courtyard. Luke (22:55) records that Peter 'sat down among them'. It was around this warming fire where Peter stood and sat, that he proceeded to deny Christ twice. The gospel accounts vary slightly as to who made the accusations against Peter, but Matthew, Mark and Luke agree that it was Peter's Galilaeen, gutteral accent that gave him away as a disciple of Jesus.

The 'cock crowing' was the name of the third of four watches into which the night was divided. It referred to the Roman division of time, making the close of the third watch around 3:00 am.

Luke's account of Peter's final denial includes a poignant scene not found in the other gospels. Luke's account states that as Peter made his third denial, the cock crew and 'the Lord turned to look upon Peter'. As Peter stood in the courtyard that separated the two residences, he would have been in a vantage point to watch as Jesus was led from the residence of Annas to that of Caiaphas. Peter had denied Christ with his lips, yet his eye was still towards Jesus. With his back to Peter and being led to trial for his life, yet Jesus was mindful of exactly where Peter was and what was transpiring in Peter's life. Jesus turned to 'look upon Peter' – Jesus did not call to Peter to shame or expose him – but gave a look, and in so doing, Peter looked upon the Lord's face. It was a look that likely went unnoticed by all, - except the one for whom it was intended. It was a look which no one but Peter could understand the meaning of - and Peter became broken - went out and wept bitterly. This was the defining moment of Peter's life.

That' to ponder– When it seems God has turned his back to you – He still knows exactly where you are.

In contrast, Peter went out and wept bitter tears of repentance, whereas Judas, though he acknowledged having betrayed innocent blood, continued to choose his own way, taking his life, rather than surrendering it.

BEFORE THE COUNCIL

The Sanhedrin, or Council, was the highest governing body of Jewish government. It was composed of seventy one members, Israelites whose descent was above question. The seventy first member was the high priest, the official president of the governing body. The other seventy members, correspond to the number of the seventy elders Moses appointed to assist him as judges.

Luke 22: 66 tells ‘as soon as it was day, the elders of the people and the chief priests and the scribes came together. This was with the ‘whole council’ according to Mark 15:1. Jesus was into their council, and asked ‘Art thou the Christ? Tell us’. If answered affirmative, it could have been interpreted as treason, for every messiah was regarded as a potential rebel against Rome. According to Jewish law the Sanhedrin, or council, could not formally convene at night, and so could not issue a verdict until day. The daybreak session was an effort to bring a semblance of legality to the proceedings, and getting a verdict as soon as it was daybreak was foremost in the intent of the Sanhedrin.

The second question, ‘Art thou then the Son of God? was intended to incriminate Jesus with the Jewish people, for if he said ‘yes’ he would be charged with blasphemy. His response, “Ye say that I am” (Luke 22:70) was the equivalent of ‘yes’.

The Sanhedrin did not have authority to execute the death sentence, but had to submit its verdict to review of Roman authorities.

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