

## Appendix 2

### *Sanhedrin*

*Tyndale Bible Dictionary*

**SANHEDRIN**• Supreme judicial council (NLT “high council”) of Judaism with 71 members, located in Jerusalem. It figures prominently in the Passion narratives of the Gospels as the body that tried Jesus, and it appears again in Acts as the judicial court that investigated and persecuted the growing Christian church.

**History** The history of the Sanhedrin is difficult to reconstruct. Jewish tradition recorded in the Mishnah views it as originating with Moses and his council of 70, but this is doubtful (Mishnah tractate *Sanhedrin* 1.6; cf. Nm 11:16). These were probably informal gatherings of tribal elders (1 Kgs 8:1; 2 Kgs 23:1). The likely origin of the Sanhedrin is to be found in the postexilic period, when those who reorganized Israel without a king made the ancient ruling families the basis of authority. The legislative assembly that emerged was a union of the nobility of the land and the priestly aristocracy (see Ezr 5:5; Neh 2:16). The influence of this council increased due to the relative freedom enjoyed under the Persians.

The advent of Hellenism in Israel in the fourth century BC affirmed this government. Hellenistic cities commonly possessed democratic assemblies and a council. Jerusalem hosted an aristocratic council that was given its appropriate Greek title, *Gerousia*. This council is first noted by Josephus, who records the decree of Antiochus III after his seizure of Jerusalem (*Antiquities* 12.3.3). Yet even though the political climate shifted drastically, the council still remained in force. Judas Maccabeus expelled the old line of elders and installed another hereditary rulership stemming from the Hasmonean families. Thus the Gerousia continued as a council of the nobility. But in the first century BC, as the tensions between Sadducees and Pharisees were pulling apart the fabric of Judaism, the council underwent a transformation. From the time of Alexandra (76–67 BC), scribes of Pharisee persuasion entered the council. Thereafter, the Gerousia was a mixture: aristocratic nobility on the one hand (both lay and priestly) and the popular Pharisees on the other.

The Romans left the council intact but more carefully defined the limits of its jurisdiction. As Judaism lost its self-government, the council lost much legislative and political power. Rome appointed the true powers of the land. For instance, Herod the Great began his rule in severe conflict with the old aristocracy, and in the end executed most of the Sanhedrin members (*Antiquities* 14.9.4). The prefects appointed the high priests and, as a symbol of control, from AD 6 to 36 they kept the priests' vestments in the Antonia fortress.

The name Sanhedrin (Greek, *sunedrion*, from *sun*, "together," and *hedra*, "seat") occurs for the first time in the reign of Herod the Great (*Antiquities* 14.9.3–5). This is the term used throughout the NT (22 times), along with "the elders" (Lk 22:66; Acts 22:5) and "gerousia" (Acts 5:21). The Mishnah provides still more titles: The Great Tribunal (*Sanhedrin* 11.2), the Great Sanhedrin (*Sanhedrin* 1.6), and the Sanhedrin of the 71 (*Shebuoth* 2.2).

After the great war of AD 70, when the final vestiges of Jewish autonomy were destroyed by Rome, the Sanhedrin reconvened in Jamnia. Its power, however, was only theoretical (addressing religious issues primarily), and the Romans gave it little consideration.

**Character** Little is known about the procedure for admission into the Sanhedrin, but because the council had aristocratic roots (and was not truly democratic), appointments were probably made from among the priests, leading scribes, and lay nobility. The Mishnah stipulates that the sole test of membership was rabbinic learning along with true Israelite descent (*Sanhedrin* 4.4). The council had 71 members (*Sanhedrin* 1.6) divided into the following three categories: the high priests, the elders, and the scribes.

**The High Priests** Usually from Sadducean backgrounds, these were the most powerful men of the Sanhedrin. Some scholars believe that they comprised an executive council of ten wealthy and distinguished citizens, on the pattern of several Greek and Roman cities. Tiberias in Galilee, for instance, was ruled by such a board, and Josephus refers to them as a body of "the ten foremost men" (*Antiquities* 20.8.11; cf. Acts 4:6). One was the captain of the temple, who supervised temple proceedings and was commander of the temple guard (Acts 5:24–26). Others served as treasurers who controlled the wages of priests and workers and monitored the vast amount of money coming through the temple. Income came from sacrifices and market taxes; the payroll included as many as 18,000 men during Herod's reconstruction of the temple. There was a president of the Sanhedrin who also headed this council and was called "the high priest" (*Antiquities* 20.10.5). In the NT he is a leading figure: Caiaphas ruled in Jesus' day (Mt 26:3), and Ananias in Paul's day (Acts 23:2). In Luke 3:2 and Acts 4:6, Annas is termed a high priest, but his title is emeritus, since his reign ended in AD 15.

**The Elders** This was a major category and represented the priestly and financial aristocracy in Judea. Distinguished laymen, such as Joseph of Arimathea (Mk 15:43), shared the conservative views of the Sadducees and gave the assembly the diversity of a modern parliament.

**The Scribes** These were the most recent members of the Sanhedrin. Mostly Pharisees, they were professional lawyers trained in theology, jurisprudence, and philosophy. They were organized in guilds and often followed celebrated teachers. One famous Sanhedrin scribe, Gamaliel, appears in the NT (Acts 5:34) and was the rabbinic scholar who instructed Paul (22:3).

**In Jesus' Day** The domain of the Sanhedrin was formally restricted to Judea, but there was a de facto influence that affected Galilee and even Damascus (cf. Acts 9:2; 22:5). The council was chiefly concerned to arbitrate matters of Jewish law when disagreements arose (*Sanhedrin* 11:2). In all cases, its decision was final. It prosecuted charges of blasphemy, as in the cases of Jesus (Mt 26:65) and Stephen (Acts 6:12–14), and participated in criminal justice as well.

It is still not known if the Sanhedrin had the power of capital punishment. Philo seems to indicate that violations to the temple could be prosecuted in the Roman period (*Legatio to Gaius*, 39). This may explain the deaths of Stephen (Acts 7:58–60) and James (*Antiquities* 20.9.1). At any rate, Gentiles caught trespassing in the temple precincts were warned about an automatic death penalty. But the NT and the Talmud disagree with this. In the trial of Jesus, the authorities are compelled to involve Pilate who alone can put Jesus to death (Jn 18:31). According to the Talmud, the Sanhedrin lost this privilege “forty years before the destruction of the temple” (*Sanhedrin* I 18a, 34; VII 24b).

**Judicial Procedure** Despite the serious irregularities of Jesus' trial, the formal procedures of Sanhedrin law describe a court that was fair and exceedingly concerned about the miscarriage of justice. Unfortunately, the procedural notes in the Mishnah only address guidelines for lesser courts (Sanhedrins with 23 members), but it can be reasonably conjectured that similar rules applied to the Great Sanhedrin of 71. In sections four and five of the Mishnah tractate *Sanhedrin*, these guidelines are carefully set forth.

The Sanhedrin sat in semicircular rows so that members could view one another. Two clerks sat at either end, taking notes and recording votes. Facing the assembly sat three rows of students, who were usually disciples of leading scribes. The accused stood in the middle facing the elders. He was required to show abject humility: he was dressed in a black robe as if in mourning and wore his hair disheveled (*Antiquities* 14.9.4). After questioning, he was dismissed and deliberations were private.

The procedures for capital cases illustrate the concern for fairness. The defense would be heard first and then the accusations. An elder who had spoken for the defense could not then speak against the accused. Students could speak only for but never against the accused (but in

noncapital cases they could do either). Members stood to vote, beginning with the youngest. Acquittal required a simple majority, but condemnation demanded a majority of two.

In noncapital cases, the trial was heard during the daytime and the verdict could be given at night. In capital cases, both trial and verdict were during the day and thus open to more public scrutiny. In noncapital cases, any verdict could be reached the same day. In capital cases, the verdict of guilt (which was immediately followed by execution) had to be postponed one day because its consequences were irreversible. Hence, these trials were not to be held on the eve of the Sabbath or a festival day (*Sanhedrin* 4:1).

The trial of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels shows many departures from the usual pattern of Sanhedrin justice. It seems clear that a miscarriage of justice was evidenced in Jesus' arrest, interrogation, and death.