

The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

Chapter 5: The Ecclesiastical Trial of Jesus—Before the Sanhedrin

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And they led Jesus away to the high priest: and with him were assembled all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes.... And the chief priests and all the council sought for witness against Jesus to put him to death; and found none. For many bare false witness against him, but their witness agreed not together. And there arose certain, and bare false witness against him, saying, “We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands.” But neither so did their witness agree together. And the high priest stood up in the midst, and asked Jesus, saying, “Answerest thou nothing? What is it which these witness against thee?” But he held his peace, and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked him, and said unto him, “Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” And Jesus said, “I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.” Then the high priest rent his clothes, and saith, “What need we any further witnesses? Ye have heard the blasphemy: what think ye?” And they all condemned him to be guilty of death. And some began to spit on him, and to cover his face, and to buffet him, and to say unto him, prophesy: and the servants did strike him with the palms of their hands (Mk. 14:53, 55-65; read Mt. 26:57, 59-68; Lk. 22:54, 63-63; Jn. 18:24).

Introduction

After the meeting with Annas (which produced no useful material for a prosecution) our Lord is taken in bonds (Jn. 18:24) to the house of Caiaphas. “His ability as a diplomat and an administrator is suggested by his tenor of office over a period of nineteen years (A.D. 18-37) in an era when the average term of office was only four years.”¹ Caiaphas, however, was every bit as wicked and corrupt as his father-in-law Annas.

At the high priest’s house *all* the chief priests, elders and scribes were present. The “all” in this passage is probably not meant to be taken literally, but in the sense that many were present to form a quorum of the court. It is unlikely that Joseph of Arimathea was present; for as a secret follower of Christ, he would not have condemned Jesus to be put to death (see Mk. 15:64 where the account says that all condemned Him to be guilty of death).

The Sanhedrin was assembled in a large upper room on the second floor of the palace (Mk. 14:66 says “Peter was below in the courtyard.”). This meeting is very important, for it is at this assembly that the Sanhedrin develops their unjust case against Jesus. As we examine this trial or preliminary investigation there are a number of questions that we need to ask: (1) What is the Sanhedrin? (2) Was this a legal trial? (3) On what basis was Christ convicted? (4) What is significant regarding the beating of the Savior? (5) What are some important applications that can be derived from our text?

¹ William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 531.

The Sanhedrin

The term “Sanhedrin” is an English transliteration of the Greek word *sunedrion* which is taken directly from the Hebrew or Aramaic term *sanedrin*.² Regarding the meaning of this word, D. A. Hagner writes,

The Gr. Word *sunedrion* frequently encountered in Classical and Hellenistic Gr. where it commonly means “place of gathering,” but also comes to connote the gathering itself and in some instances even its authority. The word occurs also in the LXX where it refers to an assembly or court (but not to the Sanhedrin as commonly understood). While *sunedrion* is common in the NT (over twenty occurrences) and in Josephus, it is not the only term or phrase used in referring to the great council of Jerusalem. The term *gerousia*, “senate,” is found occasionally in the OT Apocrypha and Josephus, and occurs once also in the N. T. (Acts 5:21). Another word used to refer to the Sanhedrin is *presbuterion*, “council of elders,” which is used twice in the NT (Luke 22:66; Acts 22:5). A word used often by Josephus in referring to the Sanhedrin is *Boule*. While this particular word is not used by NT writers, the cognate noun *Bouleutes*, “councilor” is used by Luke (23:50) in reference to Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin. The noun *Bouleuterion*, “council,” also is used by Josephus. The council is often referred to in the NT by speaking of its members using one, or a conjoining of more than one, of the following: *arxiereis*, “chief priests”; “*grammateris*”; “scribes”; *presbuteroi*, “elders.”³

The precursor of the Sanhedrin was the judges and officers which judged the people in the gates (Deut. 16:19). Every town and village would have its own legal authorities to deal with common, ordinary cases. If, however, there were difficult cases, they would be referred to a higher court, a central tribunal. Deuteronomy 17:8-9 reads, “If a matter arises which is too hard for you [i.e. local town judges] to judge, between degrees of guilt for bloodshed, between one judgment or another, or between one punishment or another, matters of controversy within your gates, then you shall arise and go up to the place which the LORD your God chooses, and you shall come to the priests, the Levites, and to the judge there in those days, and inquire of them; they shall pronounce upon you the sentence of judgment.” “The representatives of the local court were bound to act upon the ruling of the central tribunal, whether or not they found it congenial. In this way, there was a central legal authority in Israel, with the power to resolve legal problems and conflicts.”⁴

Several centuries after Moses, in the reign of Jehoshaphat (King of Judah, 872-848 B.C.), we read about the revival of the supreme court:

Moreover in Jerusalem, for the judgment of the Lord and for controversies, Jehoshaphat appointed some of the Levites and priests, and some of the chief fathers of Israel, when they returned to Jerusalem. And he commanded them, saying, "Thus you shall act in the fear of the

² “Tradition placed the founding of the Great Sanhedrin in the wilderness under Moses, for Numbers 11:16-17 records God’s instructions to Moses to gather together ‘seventy of Israel’s elders’ to perform judicial functions. These seventy plus Moses would have been seventy-one.... The Sanhedrin was organized traditionally into three chambers—a chamber of 23 priests, a chamber of 23 scribes, and a chamber of 23 elders—though often this was not strictly followed. To these, two presiding officers were added making a total of seventy-one” (James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5:1387).

³ D. A. Hagner, “Sanhedrin” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 5:269.

⁴ P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 252.

Lord, faithfully and with a loyal heart: Whatever case comes to you from your brethren who dwell in their cities, whether of bloodshed or offenses against law or commandment, against statutes or ordinances, you shall warn them, lest they trespass against the Lord and wrath come upon you and your brethren. Do this, and you will not be guilty. And take notice: Amariah the chief priest is over you in all matters of the Lord; and Zebadiah the son of Ishmael, the ruler of the house of Judah, for all the king's matters; also the Levites will be officials before you. Behave courageously, and the Lord will be with the good" (2 Chronicles 19:8-11).

This supreme court of the nation consisted of eminent religious leaders who were very knowledgeable in the law and experienced in wisdom or the law's application. There were also secular elders who by their age and experience were competent in dealing with difficult cases. The chief priest Amariah was to preside over cultic ceremonial matters while Zebadiah the prime minister presided over political matters. After the Exile (c. 538 B.C.) the elders of the Jews (Ezek. 5:5 ff.; 10:8), the nobles and officials (Neh. 2:16) were still active in the governance of the people.

By the time Jesus was born there were a number of factors that led to the corruption of this supreme council. First, there was the outside influence of the Romans. Herod, for example, had killed members of the Sanhedrin who challenged his wicked behavior. He also filled the supreme court with men who were willing to cooperate with his corrupt manner of conducting business. Under the Romans the Sanhedrin more or less adopted a form of political pragmatism to get along with their Roman overlords. In A.D. 6 Judea was made a Roman province. Under this political situation the Sanhedrin and the high priest were "granted almost exclusive control of the internal affairs of the nation...and, so long as public order was maintained and tax revenues were forthcoming, they were content for national matters to be under the control of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin."⁵ The Sanhedrin had great power, but they were always ultimately answerable to the Roman governor. As noted above, the Sanhedrin's desire to appease the Romans plays a strong factor in the decision to kill Jesus and in their arguments to Pontius Pilate (e.g., "And they began to accuse Him, saying, 'We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King'" [Lk. 23:2; see 23:5]).

Second, the Sanhedrin functioned during a time of widespread religious apostasy, in which they played a leading role. Aside from Nicodemus (Jn. 3) and Joseph of Arimathea, who were disciples of Jesus secretly (Jn. 19:38), there is no evidence that the Jewish leaders ever demonstrated any interest in Christ other than as a possible competitor. At the amazing birth of the Savior, of which the leaders in Jerusalem were well aware (Mt. 2:1ff.), only shepherds came to worship Him (Lk. 2:20). The teaching, miracles, signs and good works of the Savior were either ignored or maligned. Jesus appeared before a court consisting of hardened unbelievers.

Was the Trial Legal?

As we consider the legality of our Lord's trial, we want to examine this question from two perspectives. First, we want to know whether the Sanhedrin self-consciously violated their own laws regarding capital trials at that time. Second, we want to understand if and how biblical justice was violated.

⁵ D. A. Hagner, 5:270.

Regarding Jewish law, an analysis of the gospels reveals that the Sanhedrin violated virtually every single law associated with a capital case. According to the rules set out in the Mishnah tractate *Sanhedrin*: a) “No trial for life was allowed during the night. Yet, Jesus was tried and condemned during the hours of 1:00-3:00am Friday and executed on the feast, which was forbidden. According to Pharisaic law, no hearings in a case involving capital punishment could even be initiated on the eve of a major festival like Passover. No conviction was allowed at night. To execute a sentence on the day of one of the great feasts was contrary to the established regulations. b) The arrest of Jesus happened as a result of a bribe, namely, the blood-money which Judas received. c) Jesus was asked to incriminate himself. d) In cases of capital punishment, Jewish law did not permit the sentence to be pronounced until the day after the accused had been convicted.”⁶ e) According to the Mishnah, the Sanhedrin was supposed to meet in the temple complex in what was called “The Chamber of Hewn Stone.” The supreme court, however, met in the private residence of Caiaphas.⁷ f) The hearing was to begin not with questions to the defendant, but with a presentation of the defense.⁸ In fact, the members of the Sanhedrin “were allowed to speak on behalf of the person on trial but not against him.”⁹ g) “When evidence was taken, witnesses were examined separately and their evidence to be valid must agree in every detail.”¹⁰ Further, arresting a man and then going out to find people to testify against him was a flagrant injustice.

Various attempts have been made by scholars to refute or at least temper the accusation that virtually every aspect of the trial was unlawful. Perhaps the best objection is that it is impossible to be sure how far the provisions codified in the Mishnah (c. A.D. 200) were in effect at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus, approximately one hundred and sixty years before they were compiled. The Mishnah is a compilation of rabbinical oral traditions that date from around 200 B.C. until around A.D. 200. The Mishnah was compiled primarily by Rabbi Judah (“HaNasi” or the “Prince”) along with other Jewish scholars around A.D. 189. Because most of what was written down at the time came by way of oral tradition, no one is sure how much the Mishnah accurately reflects Jewish traditions. Edersheim writes, “It has already been hinted more than once that the law laid down in the Mishnah frequently represents the theories and speculations of the Jewish doctors of the second century A.D., and not the actual practice of any

⁶ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 926. In a similar vein D. A. Hagner writes, “The Sanhedrin, like other local courts according to the Mishnah, almost certainly was prohibited from meeting on the Sabbath or on feast days. Whether it could in extreme circumstances legally meet on a feast day as it did in the trial of Jesus cannot be known, but seems improbable. In cases involving capital punishment, the sentence could not lawfully be delivered until the day following the trial, and therefore such trials were also prohibited on the eve of either a Sabbath or a feast day (San 4:1). Cases involving potential capital punishment were similarly barred from taking place at night (San 4:1). According to Tosephta (San 7:1), the hours of meeting on regular days were from the time of the morning sacrifice to the evening sacrifice” (“Sanhedrin,” 5:271).

⁷ R. T. France notes that if the Chamber of Hewn Stone was unavailable there were two other specified official places to meet. These alternative sites did not include the house of Caiaphas (see *The Gospel of Mark*, 601).

⁸ See R. T. France, *Gospel of Mark*, 601.

⁹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, 349.

¹⁰ Ibid, 350. James Montgomery Boice writes, “The trial was also illegal because it was conducted within the space of one day. We remember that according to Jewish law there were actually to be two trials. On the first day, the entire case was to be heard and the first of two votes was taken. If the accused was found innocent, the trial ended at that point. If he was found guilty, the trial was suspended for the night while the judges reconsidered the evidence and tried to find some way by which the accused (and now condemned) man might be exonerated. Only after a night like this did they return to the judgment hall and retry the case. Every attempt was made to secure acquittal. It was only in the afternoon of this second day that a second vote was taken after which, if the vote was still for condemnation, execution followed.” (*The Gospel of John*, 5:1401)

given period. Several of their regulations deal accordingly with obsolete customs, and have little regard to the actual circumstance of the time.”¹¹ While the Mishnah can certainly shed some light on Jewish practices of the first century, it must only be used in a definitive sense when it can be confirmed by the infallible, sacred Scriptures.

Another objection is that perhaps the events that took place at Caiaphas’ house were not a formal trial, but merely a continuation of the preliminary hearing before Annas. The fact that it was late at night, at a private house indicates that in order to bend the rules the Jewish leaders simply declared this gathering an “unofficial” meeting. They considered this event *extraordinary* because: Judas’ initial contact was unexpected; the secret conspiracy became public at the holy supper; the opportunity to arrest the Savior in secret may soon pass; and, “the Jewish authorities were extremely eager to be rid of Jesus *immediately*—before the climax of the holy feast of Passover—and thus no doubt they found this opportunity impossible to resist.”¹² Further, “there was later rabbinic provision for ‘irregularities for emergencies and protection of the Torah,’ [so] it would [according to their system] probably also have been permissible at the time of Jesus for the Sanhedrin to have proceeded irregularly in a case which they treated as ‘an emergency fraught with danger to the Torah.’”¹³ What all this means is that even though from the standpoint of the Mishnah every aspect of our Lord’s trial was an illegal farce, the Jews had built-in loopholes in their law system that allowed them to pragmatically circumvent their own concepts of justice. Although some scholars attempt to excuse the Sanhedrin by pointing out their pragmatism and flexibility, they in reality are demonstrating that the Jews were even more evil and damnable in their actions. Not only were their actions unjust and corrupt, but the law system which under-girded and justified these actions was also corrupt. “The hair-splitting casuistry of rabbinic law had discovered all kinds of ways to circumvent its own regulations. All Caiaphas had to do was to say that the trial of Jesus at this time and under these conditions was in the interest of the people and of religion.”¹⁴ The bottom line is that the Jews wanted Christ dead and they were willing to do whatever it took, lawful or not, to get the job done. All the attempts to justify their actions on that night were arbitrary and inconsistent with Scripture.

Although there is no way to know how much the Mishnah reflects the actual practice of the Jews in the days of Christ, there is no question regarding the Sanhedrin’s violation of biblical principles. This point can be proven by the following. First, God’s law required the administration of justice to take place in a public area during normal business hours. Barabas writes, “It was at the gate that the elders of the city sat for the administration of justice. The Mosaic law directed that rebellious sons be brought before the elders of the city at the gate (Deut. 21:19). The manslayer had an opportunity to present his cause before the elders of the city of refuge at the entering in of the gate (Josh. 20:4). Boaz consulted the elders of Bethlehem at the gate concerning Ruth’s property (Ruth 4:1). It was at the gate that kings sat to meet with their subjects and made legal decisions.”¹⁵ Biblical justice is a very public affair. Indeed, why would it be otherwise; just proceedings are not afraid of the light of day or public scrutiny. The trial of the Savior late at night has all the characteristics of a hearing in a totalitarian state.

¹¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The History of the Jewish Nation after the Destruction of Jerusalem under Titus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1856] 1979), 381.

¹² Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 797.

¹³ R. H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 893.

¹⁴ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 929.

¹⁵ S. Barabas, “Gate,” *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 2:656.

Second, Jesus was arrested and bound before there were two or three independent witnesses. “And the chief priests and all the council sought for witnesses against Jesus to put him to death; and found none. For many bare false witness against him, but their witness agreed not together” (Mk. 14:55-56; cf. Mt. 26:59-60). Jewish courts did not have formal prosecutors. The case for the prosecution had to be made on the basis of eye-witness testimony. In the scene before us we have a court in search of a charge instead of judges dispassionately weighing the evidence of independent witnesses. The judges send out servants to scour the neighborhood for witnesses who with certain incentives and perhaps some coaching can condemn the words of the Savior. This ecclesiastical court has one major problem. Men who lie cannot get their stories straight. Normally, Jewish rules regarding the assessing of evidence were strict and fair toward the accusers; but here all semblance of legality has been cast aside.

Third, in a Hebrew court there must be at least two accusers and the accusers’ testimony must agree in every detail. There is a sense in which the accusers themselves are on trial before the arrest is even made. The witnesses are in essence the only prosecutors. If the testimony of the witnesses disagrees in any of the particulars, the testimony could not be accepted. During the trial the witnesses would again present their case (this time with the accused under arrest). If the testimony of the witnesses varied from each other or earlier testimony under a cross examination, the case would immediately be declared invalid.¹⁶ The biblical standards of justice in court cases are very strict; they strongly put the burden of proof on the prosecution. Further, the biblical penalty for being a false witness was to be punished in the same manner as the accused would have been if he had been convicted. Deuteronomy 19:16-20 says,

If a false witness rise up against any man to testify against him that which is wrong; Then both the men, between whom the controversy is, shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges, which shall be in those days; And the judges shall make diligent inquisition: and, behold, if the witness be a false witness, and hath testified falsely against his brother; then shall ye do unto him, as he had thought to have done unto his brother: so shalt thou put the evil away from among you. And those which remain shall hear, and fear, and shall henceforth commit no more any such evil among you.

The Sanhedrin had taken the best legal system in the world and turned it into a kangaroo court, an instrument of injustice. They twisted the law in order to murder Jesus Christ. The place of justice had become a place of supreme wickedness. “In the annals of jurisprudence no travesty of justice ever took place that was more shocking than this one.”¹⁷

The gospels place the chief blame for the death of Jesus squarely upon the chief priests and the entire Sanhedrin. The leaders plotted the Savior’s death (Jn. 11:53); received special pronouncements of judgment from Christ in Matthew 23; were instrumental in leading the masses astray (Mt. 23:13-15); were the first to shout “Crucify Him, crucify Him” (Jn. 19:6) when our Lord appeared before Pilate; and, they pressured Pilate to kill the Savior when Pilate sought to release Him (Jn. 19:12). [When] “Pilate said to them, ‘Shall I crucify your King?’ The chief priests answered, ‘We have no king but Caesar!’” (Jn. 19:15). The unbelieving Jews who lived at that time were also responsible. “And all the people answered and said, ‘His blood be on us and

¹⁶ “Since in Jewish judicial procedure the witnesses functioned as the prosecution, they gave their evidence individually and verbally in the presence of the judges and the accused. If their respective dispositions differed one from another even in trivial details, they were inadmissible as evidence” (William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 533. Lane’s source is B. Cohen, “Evidence in Jewish Law,” *Recuils de la Societe J. Bodin* 16 [1965], 103-115).

¹⁷ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark*, 605.

our children” (Mt.27:25). Peter told the Jews in Jerusalem who were assembled for Pentecost: “You...asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the prince of life” (Ac. 3:14-15). The people, however, acted on the counsel of their religious and political leaders. “But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus” (Mt. 27:20).

Does the fact that the testimony of Scripture regarding the Jewish leadership and covenant people’s involvement in the death of Christ justify the virulent anti-Semitism that is found throughout the Middle Ages, the twentieth century and even today? No. The hatred of Jews is unjustified and unbiblical for a number of reasons.

First, the Bible is not anti-Jewish, but anti-unbelief. There were many Jews against Christ and some Jews who lovingly followed the Savior. Paul makes this point in Romans: “Has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham” (Rom. 11:1). The apostle warns the Gentiles against pride saying: “‘Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.’ Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he may not spare you either” (Rom. 11:19-21). If it were not for the grace of God, everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, would have gladly participated in the murder of God’s Son. For apart from an interior work of the Holy Spirit, we by nature hate God (Rom. 8:7), are His enemies (Rom. 5:10) and would do everything we could to push Him out of our lives (Rom. 1:18-32). It is incredibly arrogant, stupid and unbiblical for white Europeans or anyone else to think of themselves as intrinsically superior to Jews. The crucial issue for everyone, whether a Jew or Gentile, is: Do you believe in Christ?

Second, the generation of unbelieving Jews that was directly responsible for the death of Christ was judged by God for their actions. “For you, brethren, become imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost” (1 Th. 2:14-16). God destroyed the wicked generation who murdered the Messiah in A.D. 70 when the Romans crushed Israel and destroyed the temple. Modern Jews are no more responsible for the death of Jesus than are Germans, born in America long after World War II, responsible for the horrors of Auschwitz.

Third, the Gentiles as well as the Jews were responsible for the death of Christ. When Peter and John were persecuted by the Sanhedrin, the Jerusalem church looked to God in prayer and applied Psalm 2 directly to the Savior and then said, “For truly against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done” (Ac. 4:27-28). God, according to His divine plan, permitted Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles and the Jews to bring His Son to trial and to kill Him. Pilate sentenced Jesus to death (Lk. 23:23) and turned the Savior over to be tortured and crucified by Roman soldiers (Mt. 27:26; Jn. 18:16; Mk. 15:15). The *guilt* of putting the Son of God to death is assigned not to the Jews *alone*, but also the Gentiles. (Note that Scripture assumes a complete compatibility between God’s absolute sovereignty and man’s full responsibility).

Fourth, there is a sense in which all true Christians are responsible for the death of Jesus for He was condemned, tortured and nailed to the cross to eliminate the guilt and penalty of our

sins. (This, of course, does not mean that we plotted His death and directly participated in it.) The Savior had to die as an atoning sacrifice if we were to be saved from sin, death and hell.

Over against the view of Scripture, there have been statements by Roman Catholic leaders, modernist scholars and Jewish groups exculpating the Jews *in Jesus' day* from their responsibility for the death of Christ. While the motives for these declarations may appear noble (It seems that Romanists, Christian liberals and many Jews believe that the Jewish responsibility for the death of Christ must be denied to eliminate anti-Semitism.), they in reality do much more harm to people than good for all of these denials are rooted in an implicit or explicit rejection of the veracity of Scripture. If the biblical testimony regarding the Jewish role in the conspiracy, arrest, trial and murder of the Messiah is unreliable, then the gospel itself can be called into question. We can only love the Jews biblically if we preach the whole counsel of God to them; yes, even the fact that the blessed Messiah was rejected and condemned by His own people. The truth is often painful; but, only the truth regarding the Savior can set both Jews and Gentiles free from sin.

The Basis of the Conviction

At the inquiry before the Sanhedrin, the high priest took two different approaches. The first was an attempt to convict the Savior of being a serious threat to the safety and sanctity of the temple. This required false witnesses. This tactic (which will be analyzed in a moment) failed because the witnesses' stories were not in agreement. The witnesses' poor testimony was an embarrassment to the conspirators. The second approach used to procure a conviction was to ask Jesus directly if He was the Messiah, the Son of God. If Christ answered in the affirmative, then the court could accuse the Savior of blasphemy (a death penalty offense) and they could tell Pilate that our Lord's claim to be a king was an act of treason before Caesar. They could use this admission to press Pilate on the necessity of the death penalty. Whether Caiaphas' question to Jesus was premeditated or a spur of the moment act of desperation we have no way of knowing. We do know, however, that our Lord's claim, teachings and miracles were driving Caiaphas and the Jewish leaders mad with envy and hatred. Let us turn our attention to these two tactics.

According to both Mark and Matthew's account, after a number of false witnesses failed to make a viable case against the Savior, two came forward (Mt. 26:61; Mk. 14:57 says that certain men stood up) whose stories were similar enough to make an accusation as a pair. One man alleged, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days'" (Mt. 26:61). The other testified, "We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands'" (Mk. 14:58). There are a number of things to note regarding this testimony.

(1) The accusation that our Lord was going to destroy the temple was a serious one.¹⁸ To the Jews the destruction of their Temple would be akin to an American watching the destruction of the White House, Capitol Building, Supreme Court, Pentagon and several places of worship all at once. "The seriousness of such a charge may be judged by remembering the experience of Jeremiah, who barely escaped with his life when accused of predicting the temple's destruction,

¹⁸ "Note that *naos* is the central building in the temple area which contains the Holy of Holies and the Holy Place; the *ieron* (usually translated 'Temple') is the entire temple complex with its courts as well as its structures" (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Mark's Gospel*, 659).

and of Uriah, who did not escape (Jer. 26:7-24).¹⁹ “The accusation was utterly serious, for throughout the Graeco-Roman world the destruction or desecration of places of worship was regarded as a capital offense.... The mere threat of violence against the Temple might well seem to the Sanhedrin a crime meriting the death penalty (cf. Tos. Sanhedrin xiii. 5; Rosh-Ha-Shanah 17 a; TJ Berachoth ix. 13b).”²⁰

Our Lord’s statement about the destruction of His temple or body was widely misunderstood and was no doubt a sore point with many Jews. When Christ hung on the cross the people mocked Him saying, “You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself and come down from the cross!” (Mk. 15:29-30; cf. Mt. 27:40). Even at the persecution and murder of Stephen the Jewish people were still railing against the Lord’s statement regarding His temple. “They also set up false witnesses who said, ‘This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us’” (Ac. 6:13-14). If the Savior had said, “I will destroy the temple (i.e. the building),” He would have been setting Himself above the true Old Covenant religion and that statement could have been interpreted as blasphemous.²¹ However, as we shall see in a moment, he said no such thing. Given the argument of the two witnesses at Christ’s trial, the mocking statements at the cross and the statements at the trial of Stephen, it is very likely that the Jewish leadership fanned the flames of hatred among the people by capitalizing on the people’s misunderstanding of what Jesus said. They took an innocent statement about the Savior’s death and resurrection (cf. Jn. 2:19-21) and twisted it into a direct challenge to the Jewish religion.

(2) There is a contradiction in the testimony of these two witnesses. One man testified that Jesus said “I am able to destroy the Temple” while the other witness testified that our Lord said “I will destroy the Temple” (Mk. 14:58). There is a great deal of difference between a man who claims *he is able to do something* and a person who says he *is definitely going to do it*. The words “I am able to destroy” may be interpreted as a veiled threat or as the ranting of a mad man. The statement “I will destroy” is an emphatic promise of a revolutionary act, an act of sacrilege or desecration. Calvin notes “that the appellation of *false witnesses* is applied not to those who contrive a lie which had no foundation, but to those who calumniously pervert what was justly said, and turn it into a crime.”²²

If the judges in the Sanhedrin were doing their duty according to the law, the discrepancies between the two witnesses would have been noted and sharply questioned. But, in their hatred and fury, these men press on as if the testimony were harmonious in every detail. That the testimony was inadequate is proven in two ways. First, Mark’s account says plainly, “But not even then did their testimony agree” (14:59). Second, the priest responds to this testimony in a manner that clearly indicates that he does not regard it as adequate for a conviction. “And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, saying, ‘Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?’” (Mk. 14:60). The high priest took the matter into his own hands by asking a question that the law forbade. The witnesses should have been examined, not Jesus. Caiaphas was impatient and desperate.

¹⁹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 605. “The possibility of execution for uttering threats against the temple is seen in the story of Jesus ben Ananias, who in 62 C. E. began prophesying the destruction of the temple. Outraged, ruling priests wanted him executed (Josephus, J. W. 6. 5. 3.; as quoted in Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16-20*, 446).

²⁰ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 534.

²¹ “But a charge of speaking ‘against’ the Temple could not be fastened on him; had such a charge been proved it would have been constructive blasphemy in Jewish law and would also have been an offense in Roman law...” (F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* [New York: Doubleday, 1969], 197).

²² John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3:254.

(3) The testimony is false because it does not reflect the words or meaning of what Christ actually said. The testimony is likely based on what our Lord said in John 2: “So the Jews answered and said to Him, ‘What sign do You show to us, since you do these things?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ Then the Jews said, ‘It has taken forty six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?’” (vs. 18-20). The testimony against our Lord is inaccurate in a number of ways.

First, the Savior *never* said, “I am able to destroy this temple” or “I will destroy the temple;” but, “Destroy this temple.” That is, “if you destroy this temple.” “The imperative here seems equivalent to a conditional, ‘If you destroy...I will raise up.’”²³ The ones causing the destruction are the enemies of the Savior. The answer of the Jews indicates that the audience who heard Jesus’ statement did not believe that He was claiming to be able to destroy or actually meaning to destroy the temple for they only asked about His ability to raise up the temple in three days.

Second, Christ was not referring to the temple building at all, but rather to His body. John says, “But He was speaking of the temple of His body. Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said” (2:21-22). After our Lord cleansed the temple, the Jews asked for a sign to show by what authority He did such things. The Savior responded in an enigmatic manner that if the Jews killed Him He would rise from the dead. The resurrection is the ultimate sign of Christ’s authenticity, calling, authority and acceptance before the Father.

The physical absurdity of rebuilding the temple in such a short space of time should have alerted Jesus’ audience that His words were not meant to be taken literally.²⁴ Perhaps the people were influenced by “some Jewish traditions in which the eschatological Messiah is expected to rebuild the temple of Jerusalem. This expectation may be rooted in the prophecy of Zech. 6:12: ‘The man whose name is Branch...he shall build the temple of the LORD’ (cf. *Tg.* [Targum] Zech. 6:12: ‘Behold, the man whose name is Messiah will be revealed, and he shall raise up, and shall build the Temple of the Lord’)... [Also] The men of Qumran apparently looked for a new, eschatological temple.”²⁵ In the New Testament we learn that the Savior’s resurrection does lead to a new temple—the church of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:16, 17; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21).

Third, our Lord never made a contrast between “the temple that is made with hands” and “another that is made without hands.” He never used such modifiers and, as noted, He was not speaking about the temple building, but about His own body. The two witnesses were attempting to make Jesus out to be, at the very least, a defamer of the central sanctuary and, at the most, a mad revolutionary. But their accounts of what occurred were so garbled and contrary to one another that their testimony was useless to the Sanhedrin.

Interestingly, the false testimony of these men indicates that the Jews who were not Christ’s disciples had a general knowledge of the Savior’s teachings, but did not understand it nor did they pay close attention to the details. This situation is a fitting description of many people today who live in countries that were once largely Christian; they have a vague understanding of Christ, yet have not bothered to learn the particulars. Many people are too busy for the Savior. Therefore, they go about their daily business with no interest in Him. They don’t read their Bibles, pray or go to church. Or, they go to churches that, for the most part, ignore the

²³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 199.

²⁴ “The aorist imperative to express the one decisive act is followed by the future indicative which is also punctiliar, the second action being contingent on the first” (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel*, 215).

²⁵ Craig Evans, *Mark*, 8:27-16:20, 445.

Bible and true doctrine. True disciples of the Messiah have a completely different attitude toward Jesus. They want to know everything about Him. They arrange the affairs of life to spend time studying Him, praying to Him and worshipping Him. They want to know all the intimate details of the gospel. The false witnesses at Jesus' trial demonstrate that people who do not concern themselves with the Savior; who do not bother learning the details of true doctrine; who do not demonstrate faith in the Master by their behavior are enemies of Christ. Such people's lives will end up in the dust bin of history and, even worse, their bodies and souls will be cast in hell where the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched (Mk. 9:43-48).

Fourth, even if the Jews had accurately quoted our Lord's words, "Destroy this temple," but had given them a wrong, malevolent meaning, they still would have not had a sufficient foundation to prove a capital offense. "A person might make use of those words a thousand times over—he might be very foolish, but he would not be guilty of death for such an offense. But where men have made up their minds to hate Christ, they will hate him without a cause. Oh! You that are adversaries of Christ...I know you try to invent some excuse for your opposition to his holy religion; you forge a hundred falsehoods; but you know that your witness is not true, and your trial in conscience through which you pass the Saviour, is but a mock one."²⁶

People with dark hearts of stone who are confronted with the reality of Christ and His gospel always seek out false witnesses to slay the truth. There is the adoption of Darwinian macro-evolution by scientists, modernists, universities and so forth which is one of the most absurd, irrational theories ever conceived. People love it because it denies the Word of God and the Creator-creature distinction. There is the crackpot fiction of *The Da Vinci Code*, the *Gnostic Gospel of Judas* and other such rubbish which people love because they can deny the real Christ and continue to live in their sins. There are the speculations of Kant, Hegel and Marx. When people can't stand the truth they take comfort in fantasies. In the brightness of the light of Christ they scurry into dark cracks and crevices like cockroaches. When people put Jesus on trial they can only condemn Him with lies. That is why everyone who flees the reality of the Savior must embrace an irrational, fallacious worldview.

(4) The insufficiency of these witnesses is exhibited in the high priest's response. "And the high priest stood in the midst and asked Jesus, saying, 'Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?'" (Mk. 14:60; Mt. 26:62). The high priest, who could not tolerate the calm, confident silence of Christ, challenges our Lord to respond to the witnesses' allegations. No doubt the council was frustrated by the poor quality of their witnesses and the silence of the Savior, which deprived the court of any opportunity to exploit the accusations. Caiaphas arose, stepped into the middle of the assembly to face Jesus and rhetorically challenged the silence as if the refusal to respond implies guilt in some way. Then he asked a direct question which demanded a response. The high priest in essence was saying: "Aren't you going to defend yourself against these serious charges? Tell me what these men are testifying against You?" "The first question is a challenge, even a dare. The second question is a demand. The high priest's strategy is plain enough: if the testimony that has been given thus far fails to incriminate Jesus, perhaps His replies to it will."²⁷

Our Lord did not respond to these questions, but remained perfectly silent. "But He kept silent and answered nothing" (Mk. 14:61; Mt. 26:63). He held His peace for a number of reasons. First, the trial was illegal and there was no need to answer false witnesses. Caiaphas knew "that those witnesses had been procured by fraud: but this is the way in which wicked men, when they

²⁶ Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Greatest Trial on Record," 9:101.

²⁷ Craig Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 448.

find themselves in the possession of authority and power, throw off shame, and indulge in arrogance.”²⁸ Jesus had no intention of dignifying the false testimony with a response. “And thus, in the majesty of His bearing He entered, as it were, His protest against the high priest’s violation of the principle of justice. It was no part of the duty of a ‘panel’ at the bar to clear up conflicting testimonies against himself, in order to assist prejudging judges to effect a conviction.”²⁹ “Innocence and dignity could make no other reply. Then this was a loud silence that literally spoke volumes. As it grew and grew in the ears of all present it fairly shouted that the whole proceeding, plus this last act of Caiaphas’, was absolutely illegal, and no more upsetting conviction of this travesty of a just court could be borne in upon the minds of this court.”³⁰ When men commit themselves to wickedness, there is nothing more piercing to the heart than silence for silence weighs heavy upon a guilty heart and conscience.

Second, the Savior was again fulfilling prophecy—“He opened not His mouth” (Isa. 53:7; cf. 42:1-4). Third, Christ did not defend Himself and seek an acquittal because He knew His hour had come and was determined to go to Golgotha. “Jesus bore Himself with the majesty of the Son of God, Who knew all that was before Him, and passed through it as on the way to the accomplishment of His mission.”³¹

Our Lord’s silence at this moment of supreme injustice and slander sets before us an example of *patience* when we suffer under false accusations. As Peter tells us: “For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps; Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Pet. 2:20-23). J. C. Ryle writes,

Let it never surprise true Christians if they are slandered and misrepresented in this world. They must not expect to fare better than their Lord. Let them rather look forward to it, as a matter of course, and see in it a part of the cross which everyone must bear after conversion. Lies and false reports are among Satan’s choicest weapons. When he cannot deter people from serving Christ, he labors to harass them and make Christ’s service uncomfortable. Let us bear it patiently, and not count it a strange thing. The words of the Lord Jesus should often come to our minds: “Woe to you when all men speak well of you” (Luke 6:26). “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kind of evil against you because of me” (Matthew 5:11).³²

Jesus also sets forth an example of wisdom. When we are before men who are only interested in finding fault when there is none, then we should imitate the Savior and remain silent. Under such circumstances anything you say, right or wrong, will be used against you. Isaiah warns us regarding the scornful man who watches for iniquity, “Who make a man an offender by a word, and lay a snare for him who reproves in the gate, and turn aside the just by empty words” (Isa. 29:21). Sadly, we live in a time when even many church courts are not interested in justice. Where presbyteries and their commissions have vile presuppositions

²⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3:255.

²⁹ James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 559.

³⁰ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1061.

³¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 559.

³² J. C. Ryle, *Mark*, 242.

regarding a person (usually a puritan or a conservative), they look for any word to condemn. When in the presence of such ethical and theological dullards, one's words must be few and carefully weighed.

(5) With the attempt to convict the Savior by the use of false witnesses in shambles, the high priest goes directly to the main question on the minds of everyone in the room. There is a sense of frustration and anger in Caiaphas' inquiry. "Caiaphas, feeling the full force of Jesus' silence, intends to counteract that silence."³³ "And the high priest answered and said to Him, 'I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God'" (Mt. 26:63). With this question the trial reaches its decisive phase. It is as though Caiaphas, in his frustration, wants to forget all the formalities of the trial and go directly to the heart of the matter. There are a number of things we need to note regarding this question.

First, the high priest compels Jesus to answer by charging Him under an oath to God to speak the truth. The word *exorkizo* translated "I adjure" (KJV, NASB, RSV), "charge under oath" (NIV) or "put under oath" (NKJV) is a rare, formal, judicial expression used when invoking the name of God in order to compel a true answer.³⁴ It is similar to our modern American court where a witness places his right hand on the Bible and swears before God to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Caiaphas in his official capacity as the high priest, the highest legal authority in Israel, demands that Jesus take an oath before the ever watchful eye of Jehovah. By appealing to God—the living One—the court is telling the man under oath that Jehovah hears what he is about to say and will without question punish him if he utters a false statement in God's name. Such false testimony would be equivalent to violating the third commandment which says, "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who taketh His name in vain" (Ex. 20:7). James Durham gives us a sense of the seriousness of this commandment:

It is a sin immediately against God Himself, and is not, as sins of the second table, nay not as other particular sins of the first table, whereby men divert from God to idolatry, giving to idols what is His due, or turn their back on Him, or slight His commanded worship, as in the first, second and fourth commands; but this does immediately and directly, and by commission, terminate on God Himself most daringly and presumptuously, as it were affronting Him who has made Himself known by His name.³⁵

It is ironic that Caiaphas, the great liar, appeals to the third commandment at this trial; for the appeal in this context of trumped up charges and false witnesses is a violation of the third

³³ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 1061.

³⁴ See R. T. France, *Matthew*, 380.

³⁵ James Durham, *The Law Unsealed—Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments* (Edmonton, Alberta: Still Water Revival Books, 1986, 1997), 178. "[An oath] implies [1] An acknowledgment of the existence of God. [2] Of His attributes of omnipresence, omniscience, justice, and power. [3] Of His moral government over the world; and [4] Of our accountability to Him as our Sovereign and Judge. Hence 'to swear by the name of Jehovah,' and to acknowledge Him as God, are the same things. The former involves the latter.... Such being the case, it is evident that a man who denies the truths above mentioned cannot take an oath. For him the words he utters have no meaning. If he does not believe that there is a God; or suppose that he admits that there is some being or force which may be called God, if he does not believe that that Being knows what the juror says, or that He will punish the false swearer, the whole service is a mockery.... But acts of worship involving the acknowledgment of the being and attributes of God, and of our responsibility to Him, they are in their nature good.... As an oath involves an act of worship, it is plain that it should not be taken on any trivial occasion, or in an irreverent manner" (Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989] 3:307, 308, 310).

commandment itself. Yes, the living God is present and is listening. However, it is Caiaphas who is guilty of a daring and presumptuous sin, not Jesus.

Second, the question, although simple and direct, was very devious, for our Lord could only condemn Himself by His answer. If Christ said that He was not the Messiah, then He could be exposed as an imposter or even a false prophet, for He had claimed to be the Christ. A negative answer would have been the end of His ministry; the people could no longer place their hope in Him. He would no longer be a threat to the corrupt Jewish authorities. If He answered in the affirmative, then the Sanhedrin would present Him to the Romans as a dangerous revolutionary, an alternative king to Caesar. “[T]he council was prepared to regard the open and unequivocal claim of Jesus to be the Messiah a capital crime. Judaism expected the Messiah to provide proof of his identity. A Messiah imprisoned, abandoned by his followers, and delivered helpless into the hands of his foes represented an impossible conception. Anyone who, in such circumstances, proclaimed himself to be the Messiah could not fail to be a blasphemer who dared to make a mockery of the promises given by God to his people.”³⁶ The whole question was designed to drive Jesus into a corner.

Third, in God’s providence, the question is of the greatest significance for it gives Christ the opportunity almost immediately before His crucifixion to state, in a public forum under the most solemn of oaths, the clear truth about who He really is.

It is interesting that an examination of the Savior’s ministry indicates that our Lord had never openly declared to the Jewish people, “I am the Messiah.” He rather revealed Himself in an implicit manner. William Hendriksen writes,

Now it cannot be said that up to this time Jesus had never revealed himself as such. In His conversation with the Samaritan woman had he not very definitely declared himself to be indeed the Messiah? See John 4:25, 26. Had he not defended those who addressed him as “the Son of David” (Matt. 21:15, 16)? Had he not, by implication, referred to himself as “the stone rejected by the builders but made the cornerstone” (21:42)? Had he not pointed to himself as “the Son of man” destined one day to judge all men (25:31-46)?

All of this is true. But it could be argued that a declaration made in Samaria did not necessarily reach the Jews; that Matt. 21:15, 16 was not a direct claim but only a reflection on an exclamation made by others; that Matt. 21:37-39; 21:42 are parabolic, hence not direct; and that the term “Son of man” was not interpreted in the same way by everybody. It can even be added that there were definite reasons why during the earlier part of his ministry Jesus did not *openly* declare to the Jews, “I am the Messiah.” See on 8:4; 9:30; 17:9. They would certainly have misunderstood it. See John 6:15. But now that the events that were happening with reference to him were making it clear that his Messiahship was that of the Suffering Servant, as he had himself declared again and again to his disciples (12:40; 16:21; 17:22, 23; 20:18, 19; John 3:14), the moment had also arrived to come forth with a very clear statement, made before the highest authorities of the Jewish nation.³⁷

The time for any obscurity or secrecy regarding His true identity was over. Now that Jesus was about to die as a sacrifice for sin and any temptation by the people to make a political conqueror out of Him was over, the time had come to explicitly reveal Himself. In Matthew 16:20 “He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ.” But with His death and resurrection the whole world must know the truth. “The Jews could never

³⁶ William Lane, *Mark*, 536.

³⁷ William Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 244.

say after these words that they were not clearly told that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ of God.”³⁸

Fourth, the question has two aspects. “Are you the Christ, the Son of God?” The phrase “Son of God” qualifies the term “Messiah.” Caiaphas is asking Jesus if He is the anointed King, the fulfillment of Psalm 2. “The kings of the earth set themselves...against the LORD and against His anointed.... I will declare the decree: the LORD has said to Me, You are My Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession” (vs. 2, 7, 8).

The word Messiah is a transliteration of the Hebrew *Mashiach* which means “an anointed One.” In the Old Testament the practice of anointing was used for cultic objects (i.e. every object relating to the ceremonial worship was consecrated, set apart or made holy by the special oil of anointing); the priesthood or all the descendants of the house of Aaron (Ex. 30:30); and Kings (e.g., Saul, David, Solomon, Joash, etc). The phrase “the anointed of the LORD” was even used as a synonym for the king of Israel (1 Sam. 12:3, 5). “Anointing conveyed sanctity to the person who now stood under the special protection of the God of Israel (cf. 1 Sam. 24:5ff.) This rite of commission to high office was not only symbolic of the gifts requisite for that office but was regarded as a charismatic bestowal of such gifts (cf. 1 Sam. 16:13; Isa. 61:1).”³⁹ Interestingly, the simple, brief form of the title “the Messiah” does not occur in the Old Testament. “The word always has a qualifying genitive or suffix attached to it: ‘the Messiah of Jehovah’ (‘the Lord’s Anointed’), or ‘my Messiah’ (‘mine Anointed’).”⁴⁰ After the close of the Old Testament canon, the designation for this coming, great eschatological king was abbreviated into the simple term “Messiah.”

The anointing of the priests and kings of the Old Testament pointed to the anointing of Christ, the great priest-king. Jesus, however, was not anointed with oil but with the Holy Spirit beyond measure. “When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased’” (Mt. 3:16-17). “For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure” (Jn. 3:34). The descending of the Holy Spirit upon the Savior at His baptism was a setting apart unto the Messianic office and a public declaration by God that Jesus is the Messiah. This anointing was unique in that it was unlimited and permanent. For Peter this anointing was an important part of the gospel message. When the gospel was first preached to the Gentiles he said, “The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ—He is Lord of all.... How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him” (Ac. 10:36, 38). It is important that we do not forget the significance of the term Christ. Paul and the other apostles writing by the Holy Spirit favored the combination “Jesus—Christ” or “Christ—Jesus,” thus continually emphasizing the legitimate standing of the Savior in His office of Messiah.

The expression son (or Son) of God has four different meanings in Scripture. a) The phrase or its equivalent can refer to God’s people. In Genesis six it refers to the godly line of Seth. “Now it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were beautiful...”

³⁸ J. C. Ryle, *Mark*, 242.

³⁹ J. Jocz, “Messiah” in the *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 4:199.

⁴⁰ Geerhardus Vos, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus* (New York: George H. Doran, 1926), 104.

(1-2). In Exodus, Jehovah refers to Israel as His firstborn (4:22). In the prophecy of Hosea God speaks to Israel saying, “out of Egypt I have called My Son.” (This passage is also a reference to Jesus coming back from safety in Egypt to accomplish His redemptive work). In Psalm 82:6 God refers to the judges of Israel as “children of the Most High.” John says that everyone who is born again is a child of God. “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn. 1:13). Therefore we cry “Abba Father” and pray “Our Father which art in heaven” (Mt. 6:9).

b) The phrase Son of God is often used in a trinitarian sense which affirms the sonship of Christ “as existing in eternity before the world was, as something not only antedating but absolutely transcending his human life and his official calling as Messiah”⁴¹ (cf. Mt. 11:27; 14:26, 33; 16:16; 21:33-46; 22:41-46; Jn. 6:69; 8:16, 18, 23; 10:15, 30; Rom. 1:3; 8:3; Gal. 4:4; Heb. 1:1, etc). This meaning is common in Paul’s Christology and was even used by Jesus Himself in passages such as Matthew 11:27, “All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” This statement is really quite amazing. It means that “there are mysteries in the person, Jesus, which none but the infinite and eternal God can know.”⁴²

c) The expression Son of God is used because Christ’s human nature is ascribed in Scripture “to the direct, supernatural paternity of God.”⁴³ “And the angel answered and said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the son of God’” (Lk. 1:35). “The son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God” (Lk.3:38). Both the first Adam and the second Adam are the son of God in a unique sense.

d) The expression Son of God is also used not as an expression of nature, but as an official Messianic title. It describes the special kingly office of the Redeemer not only as the special descendant of David prophesied in Scripture to rule forever, but also with reference to the universal authority bestowed on the theanthropic Savior at the resurrection (Mt. 28:18). Paul said that “Christ our Lord...was...declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1:3-4). Peter preached, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Ac. 2:36). Even though by His very nature Jesus was the Son of God; in consequence of the Savior’s death and resurrection, God declares that He indeed is the Messiah, who is the sovereign Lord. The Savior has royal status by nature, by the incarnation and by the resurrection. All of these aspects are intimately connected. “Just as little as ‘the Father’ and ‘Lord of heaven and earth’ are titles derived from the soteric situation, just as little is ‘the Son’ a designation of Jesus ultimately derived from that. He is called ‘the Son’ not simply because of his being the Messiah, but because his Messiahship is determined by an anterior sonship lying back of it.”⁴⁴

Before the resurrection our Lord was the Son of God in suffering, the Christ in humiliation. But after the resurrection the Mediator is exalted and enthroned. Now, He is the Christ, the Son of God with power. Paul says, that God “raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and

⁴¹ Ibid., 141.

⁴² J. Gresham Machen, *The Christian Faith in the Modern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1936] 1965), 151.

⁴³ Geerhardus Vos, 141.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 151.

dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church...” (Eph, 1:20-22).

The question that naturally comes to mind regarding Caiaphas’ question is: what did he mean by the expression “Son of God?” Was he using the phrase only as synonym or title for Messiah? A number of commentators hold this position arguing that the Jewish writings from the time of Jesus and the apostles understood “Son of God” only in a messianic sense. Jewish hopes were directed to the Messiah who was a great man, a man of men, “but was limited to a single issue: do you claim to be the Messiah?”⁴⁵ Hagner writes, “There is no need to suppose by this language that the high priest meant exactly what the early church meant by this phrase in its Christology. That the Messiah would be the Son of God, even uniquely so (though, of course, metaphysically distinct from God), was quite probably the high priest’s understanding.”⁴⁶

Although most modern commentators do not believe that Caiaphas had deity in mind, there is a good possibility that the high priest was using “Son of God” in a metaphysical sense in his question. While it is true that Jews at that time did not regard the Messiah as a divine-human person, nevertheless the Jewish leaders had at times already confronted the Savior with His claim to be God. The Jews wanted to “kill Him, because He...said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God” (Jn. 5:18). After our Lord said “Son, thy sins be forgiven thee” the scribes reasoned “in their hearts, why doth this man speak blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God only?” (Mk. 2:5-11). When the Savior declared, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.’ Then they took up stones to throw at Him” (Jn. 8:57-58). Later Christ said, “I and My Father are one’...the Jews took up stones again to stone Him,” saying, “For a good work we stone thee not; but for blasphemy; and because thou being a man, makest thyself God” (Jn. 10:28-29). Further, throughout His ministry, Jesus spoke of the Father as His direct sender in a unique and unmistakable manner (cf. Jn. 5:19-47; 8:16-19, 53, 58). Given all of these examples of the Savior asserting His deity publicly and the very hostile manner in which the Jews responded to it, can anyone doubt that the leadership had not been informed of Christ’s amazing claims? With this history in mind it is likely that Caiaphas hoped that Jesus would admit to His metaphysical sonship with the Father.

(6) After this question the Savior breaks His silence. His answer contains two elements. First, He directly answers the question. “Jesus said to him, ‘It is as you said’” (Mt. 26:64). “I am” (Mk. 14:62). Our Lord openly confessed that He was the Messiah, the Son of God. John Gill gives us the richness of this confession:

...the Christ, the anointed of God, who was so from everlasting, and in time; being before the world was, installed into, and invested with the office of mediator; and in the fullness of time, anointed with the Holy Spirit without measure: he might truly say he was the Messiah, since all the characters of him in the books of the prophets, met in him; and all the miracles he was to work in proof of his Messiahship were wrought by him: as also that he was the son of God, not by creation, as angels and men; nor by adoption, as saints; nor as man, or in the human nature, in which he was the son of man, and not the son of God; not was he begotten as man, whereas he is called the only-begotten son, and the begotten of the father; and was he the son of God as man, not the first, but the third person must be his father; besides, he was the son of God before his incarnation: nor as mediator neither; he was the son of God, antecedent to his office as mediator; his sonship is distinct from it, is an illustration of it, and what puts virtue into it;

⁴⁵ William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 535.

⁴⁶ Donald Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 799.

but he is so as God, as a divine person, by natural and eternal filiation; being begotten of the father in the divine essence, and of the same nature; and having the same perfections with him, and in all things equal to him; and is the sense in which he always affirmed God to be his father, and himself to be his son.⁴⁷

Second, He gives the Sanhedrin a bold and amazing prophetic promise: “Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mt. 26:64; cf. Mk. 14:62). There are a number of things to note regarding this statement.

a) Our Lord uses the authoritative formula, “I say to you.” When a prophet would speak in such a situation he would always appeal to the fact that the words he spoke originated with God. He would use phrases such as “thus saith the LORD,” “the LORD says” and so on. But Jesus spoke on His own authority. Only God could speak in the way our Savior did.

The answer “I say to you” also has all the characteristics of a pronouncement as well as a confession. Schilder writes,

This was the last and the perfect fulfillment of Christ’s prophetic office in the state of humiliation which He performed over against His people. In the final hour He reaches into the highest council and confesses Himself. Now He has sworn this good confession in the presence of the Sanhedrin and of Caiaphas. Now His official obedience has attained perfect faithfulness to itself. And this was done in the very hour in which the demand of Caiaphas was, as we saw, a denial of Christ, just as Peter’s extravagant oaths, as we shall see later, also denied Him. Over against this denial of His work and of the essence of His being, then, Christ places the good confession.⁴⁸

b) Christ’s statement brings together two important messianic passages: Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13. Both of these passages speak of the exaltation and enthronement of the divine human Mediator at the right hand of God; the place of supreme honor and authority. Psalm 110:1 reads, “The LORD said to my Lord, sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.” The Sanhedrin did not understand the biblical concept of the suffering servant. They believed it was impossible for the Man in bonds before them, who was in a state of humiliation, to be the exalted Messiah. Jesus tells them that He will soon take His seat next to God Himself and that He will have absolute power over His enemies. In other words, soon the tables will be turned.

The Daniel passage also speaks of the ascension and enthronement of the Messiah. “I was watching in the night visions, And behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which will not pass away, and His kingdom the one which will not be destroyed” (7:13-14). Since our Lord’s reference to Daniel is so often misinterpreted, it is important that we do not misunderstand Jesus’ statement. Many interpreters teach that the Savior’s allusion to coming with the clouds is a reference to the *parousia* or second coming of Christ. In other words, the Sanhedrin will be eye-witnesses of his glory in the distant future when He returns to judge the quick and the dead. At the second coming the One before them will be the judge and these wicked men will have to answer for this great injustice they are

⁴⁷ John Gill, *Exposition of the New Testament* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, [1809] 1979), 7:343-344.

⁴⁸ Klaas Schilder, *Christ on Trial*, 132.

now committing. This interpretation is very popular with premillennialists who view the kingdom essentially as wholly future.

Although this interpretation is a legitimate *application* of what our Lord said, it is not the meaning of Daniel 7:13ff. The prophecy of Daniel does not refer to a coming to earth but rather to the ascension; to a coming up to God the Father—the Ancient of Days. Although the New Testament often speaks of the Savior receiving all power and authority at the resurrection (Mt. 28:18; Rom. 1:3-4), Scripture treats the resurrection, ascension and enthronement of the Mediator as an organic whole, as all crucial aspects of the Redeemer’s exaltation. Daniel 7:13ff. is a description of the enthronement ceremony that occurs in heaven when the Messiah ascends before God and takes His seat of authority at the Father’s right hand. The Son of Man is brought near by angels or ministering spirits. “The tremendous majesty of the scene serves to bring to the fore the importance and dignity—yes, the Deity—of the Person who comes with the clouds of heaven.”⁴⁹ Harold Fowler writes,

In Daniel’s vision, *coming on the clouds* means that the Son of Man was coming onstage, into the scene. It is not a *coming* toward Daniel or toward earth, but a *coming* seen from the standpoint of God, since Daniel uses three verbs that all indicate this: “coming...approached...was led to” the Ancient of Days. This is no picture of the Second Coming, because *the Son of man* is going the wrong way for that. His face is turned, not toward earth, but toward God. His goal is not to receive His saints, but to receive His kingdom (Cf. 1 Peter 3:22; Luke 19:12; Acts 2:32-36; 3:22; 5:31; Col 3:1; Rev. 3:21).⁵⁰

Jesus couples these two messianic passages together because they both speak of His enthronement and authority. He is given “dominion, glory and kingship” which are both universal and everlasting. He is given victory over all His enemies in heaven and on earth. This victory will be progressively carried out in history by the Holy Spirit. It will be accomplished by judgments in history and then completed at the second—bodily, visible, literal—coming of Christ. If these men had any trust in the Scriptures at all, they would have been on their knees trembling in fear before Jesus, begging for mercy. But they had no faith whatsoever. Thus in Luke’s account our Lord said, “If I tell you, you will by no means believe.”

The implications of what Jesus says are very important. Our Lord is directly rebuking the Jewish concept of a political Messiah or nationalistic deliverer so common in His own day. The Savior’s triumph is not political or military; but rather is spiritual. His triumph is at the right hand of God. The kingdom with power is not in the distant future, but in the immediate future at

⁴⁹ Edward J. Young, *Daniel* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1949] 1972), 156.

⁵⁰ Harold Fowler, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1985), 4:487. “Our discussion of the meaning of Daniel 7:13 in its Old Testament context led us to the conclusion that its keynote is one of vindication and exaltation to an everlasting dominion, and that the ‘coming’ of verse 13 was a coming *to* God [the Ancient of Days] to receive power, not a ‘descent’ to earth. When we studied Jesus’ use of these verses, we found that in every case this same theme was the point of the allusion, and, in particular, that nowhere (unless here) was verse 13 [in Daniel 7] interpreted of his coming to earth at the Parousia. In particular, the reference to Mark 14:62, where the wording is clearly parallel to that in the present verse [Mark 13:26], was to Jesus’ imminent vindication and power, with a secondary reference to a manifestation of that power in the near future. Thus, the expectation that Jesus would in fact use Daniel 7:13 in the sense in which it was written is amply confirmed by his actual allusion. He saw in that verse a prediction of his imminent exaltation to an authority which supersedes that of the earthly powers which have set themselves against God.... Jesus is using Daniel 7:13 as a prediction of that authority which he exercised when in AD 70 the Jewish nation and its leaders, who had condemned him, were overthrown, and Jesus was vindicated as the recipient of all power from the Ancient of Days” (R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker, (1971) 1982], 235, 236).

the resurrection and ascension. By way of application, note that the premillennial concept of a future kingdom which is centered in Jerusalem and is maintained by military might or *external* coercion is very similar to the Jewish conception that our Lord rejected. This interpretation is supported by our next consideration.

c) The exaltation of Christ is to take place very soon. Our Lord said to the Sanhedrin, “hereafter [or literally ‘from now on’] you [plural] will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mt. 26:64). Luke’s account says, “Hereafter [‘from now on’] the Son of Man will sit on the right hand of the Power of God” (22:69). The expression “from now on” in this context refers not to that exact moment of time, but to the very near future only a few days away (3 days by Jewish reckoning) when the Savior would rise from the dead as the exalted King of kings. It is simply bad exegesis to argue that “from now on” refers to the second coming and general judgment over two thousand years in the future. The men standing in front of Jesus would literally see proof in their own lifetimes that the Man they unjustly convicted and put to death as a common criminal had been vindicated and exalted to the place of ultimate authority.⁵¹ These apostate leaders will see with their own eyes that everything Christ said under oath was absolutely true.

Christ will ascend and lean upon the bosom of the Father and not be consumed because, as God, He always existed as the begotten of the Father; as man, the second Adam, He perfectly obeyed the law and conquered sin and death on the cross. The Christological day of the LORD, where the full brunt against sin has burned itself out on the lamb of God, will soon be completed. By His death the Sanhedrin and the old order is cast aside and replaced by the church of Jesus Christ. The Sanhedrin’s unbelief and injustice is used of God to usher in the kingdom of His dear Son, which is universal in scope and without end. “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD’S doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Mk. 12:10-11). The future belongs to the Man in bonds before them. Early Sunday morning the fate of the Sanhedrin and the unbelieving Jewish nation will be sealed when the rich man’s tomb is unsealed. From now on, Jesus is the King with power

Our Lord’s prediction of His glorification is an implicit prediction of the downfall and judgment of the Jewish leaders. From this statement we can draw an excellent application for unbelievers and obstinate apostates, as well as Christians who are suffering unjustly for the Master. Calvin writes,

For how comes it that wicked men are so much at their ease? How comes it that they are so insolent in rebellion, but because they do not set a high value on the crucified Jesus? It is therefore necessary to remind them of a dreadful judgment, which, with all their stupidity, they will not be able to avoid. And though they ridicule as a fable what is said about the future coming of Christ, still it is not in vain that the Judge summons them to his tribunal, and orders them to be summoned by the preaching of the Gospel, that they may be rendered the more inexcusable. But this announcement is fitted to be of very great use even to believers, that they may now with the eyes of hope look for Christ *sitting at the right hand of the Father*, and patiently wait till he comes, and may likewise believe that the rage of wicked men against him, while absent, will not be without its consequences; for they will be compelled to behold him on high *coming from heaven*, whom now they not only despise but even trample upon in their pride.⁵²

⁵¹ “That is, after all, what the second-person address would naturally imply: the vision will be that of those who hear Jesus speaking, not of some future generation” (R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 611).

⁵² John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3:257-258.

The very One who ascends with the clouds (Dan. 7:13; Ac. 1:9) will return with the clouds for judgment. The Jews rejected the claims of Jesus and put Him to death. They even severely persecuted the church for forty years after the Savior's death and resurrection. But, with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the slaughter of the Sanhedrin and their families by the Romans and the total destruction of the temple, the truth of Christ's words cannot be denied. "The generation that Jesus said would not pass away until all these things came to pass [Mt. 24:34-35] finally came to understand the implications of their rebellion: Jesus is the one who was given '[D]ominion, Glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him' (Daniel 7:14)."⁵³

d) The phrase "with the clouds," which can mean "in connection with the clouds," or "surrounded by clouds," or "upon the clouds" (LXX), is clearly associated in Scripture with Jehovah. "Behold, the LORD rides on a swift cloud, and will come into Egypt; the idols will totter at His presence" (Isa. 19:1). "O LORD my God...who makes the clouds His chariot" (Ps. 104:1, 3). In the Bible clouds often are associated with God's special presence (Ex. 13:21; 14:24; 19:9; 20:21; 24:15; 33:9; 34:5; 1 Kg. 8:12), and His judgment (Isa. 19:1; Ezek. 30:3; Joel 2:2; Ps. 97:2-4; Nah. 1:3). Daniel 7:13 fits perfectly with Psalm 110:1 because the One who comes before the Father is on or with the clouds, which is indicative of Deity, yet He is distinct from "the Ancient of Days." The members of the Sanhedrin understood the clouds terminology better than many modern interpreters. They understood that Jesus was placing Himself metaphysically on the same level with Jehovah, the covenant God of Israel. Whenever we encounter cloud terminology associated with the judgment of Israel (Mt. 24:30) and the second bodily coming of Christ (Rev. 1:7), we must remember the terminology of Daniel 7:13ff. which refers to the ascension and enthronement of the divine-human mediator that is the inauguration of this authority. With the resurrection and enthronement of the Savior "the Father...has committed all judgment to the Son."

The Savior Condemned

Jesus' statement gives Caiaphas and the council exactly what they want. To an unbeliever the Savior's words could be only construed as madness, blasphemy or both. Thus the high priest responds with excitement. "Then the high priest tore his clothes saying, 'He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses? Look, now you have heard His blasphemy! What do you think?'" They answered and said, 'He is deserving of death'" (Mt. 26:65-66; cf. Mk. 14:63-64).

The wicked hypocrisy of Caiaphas is exposed when we compare his words to his actions. He acts shocked and rends his garments. To the Jew the tearing of the garments represented incredible sorrow, shock or outrage. "According to *M. Sanh.* 7:5 when the judges hear blasphemy they are to 'stand up on their feet and tear their garments, and they may not mend them again.' The custom of tearing one's clothing reaches back to the earliest times of biblical history. The action conveyed great anguish and/or penitence."⁵⁴ Reuben tore his clothes when he saw that Joseph was no longer in the pit (Gen. 37:29). Job tore his robe when he heard about the destruction of his property and the death of his children (Job 1:20). After she was violated Tamar tore her robe and put ashes on her head (2 Sam. 13:19). For Caiaphas, however, it was an action

⁵³ Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Atlanta, GA: American Vision, 1994), 157.

⁵⁴ Craid A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 452.

devoid of sorrow or real anguish for two reasons. First, it is likely, based on previous statements, that the high priest was not very surprised by Christ's words. Second, his words have an air of relief and joy to them "as if to say, 'We've got him now.'"⁵⁵

In response to our Lord's answer the Sanhedrin's verdict was unanimous. As Mark notes, "And they all condemned Him to be worthy of death" (14:64). "No reflection, no careful consideration was needed."⁵⁶ There was not one voice of protest or doubt in the whole assembly. Our Lord had predicted the outcome in Mark 10:33, "The Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles."

This condemnation relating to the charge of blasphemy raises the question: What did Jesus say that the court regarded as blasphemous? The pentateuchal law concerning blasphemy is found in Leviticus 24:16, "And whosoever blasphemeth the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall certainly stone him, the stranger as well as him who is born in the land. When he blasphemeth the name of the LORD, he shall be put to death." "The word blasphemy in the Hebrew is *naqah*, to curse, revile, puncture or pierce. It means to seek to destroy."⁵⁷ To commit blasphemy would involve a serious infringement against Jehovah's majesty and an attack upon His honor. There was something that the Savior said that the Sanhedrin regarded as a mocking of God, as an open attack on God's name. Was it our Lord's claim to be the Messiah? No. Such a claim, even if wrong, would not constitute blasphemy. Did Christ use the name of Jehovah in a careless or vain manner? No, certainly not. The only logical answer to this question is that the Jews understood Jesus to be using the phrase "Son of God" as an assertion of equality with God.⁵⁸ That the council understood our Lord in this manner is supported by John 19:7, "The Jews answered him [Pilate], 'We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God.'" Further, (as noted) the coming with the clouds terminology also gave the Savior divine status.

Given the claims of Jesus, both here and in other sections of the gospels (Jn. 5:17-26; 8:57-59; 10:28-39; Mk. 2:5-11), we must either believe that Jesus was who He claimed to be, "the Son of God" in the fullest sense of the term, the second person of the trinity, equal with God in power and glory, of the same essence with the Father; or, we must take the position of the Sanhedrin that Christ was a liar who was indeed guilty of blasphemy and worthy of death.

Regarding the Redeemer, there are really only two positions that people can hold. With Jesus, the apostles and all true Christians throughout history, we can trust in the Nazarene as God and man in one person. Or, we can side with the enemies of God and Christ and reject His claims of deity and supreme authority. Those who side with the Sanhedrin are many: Jews,

⁵⁵ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 933.

⁵⁶ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 1068.

⁵⁷ Rousas J. Rushdoony, *Leviticus* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2005), 337.

⁵⁸ "We cannot certainly determine how these two expressions, 'the Christ,' and 'the Son of God,' were connected in the mind of Caiaphas. It may be that he regarded them as of substantially the same meaning, though it may be questioned how far the title, Son of God, was one of the customary titles of the Messiah at this time. Still it had been so often and openly applied to Jesus, that we cannot well suppose Caiaphas ignorant of it. At the time of His baptism, John the Baptist testified of His Divine Sonship (John i. 34): 'I saw and bare record that this is the Son of God.' Very soon after (verse 49), Nathanael thus avows his faith: 'Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel.' Often was He thus addressed by evil spirits whom He cast out (Matt. viii. 29; Mark iii. 11, v. 7; Luke iv. 41, viii.28). After the stilling of the tempest (Matt. xiv. 33), those in the ship said (Mark xv. 39), 'Truly this was the (a) Son of God.' Only in one instance, however, did Jesus directly claim for Himself this title (John ix. 35-37), although He often indirectly applied it to Himself. (So John xi. 4) In like manner He repeatedly speaks of God as His father (John v. 17)" (Samuel J. Andrews, *Life of our Lord upon the Earth*, 515-516).

Mohammedans, Unitarians, all the Unitarian cults, atheists, modernists, agnostics and so forth. You need to ask yourself this question: What side are you on? Our Lord said, “He who is not with Me is against Me” (Mt. 12:30). He also said that everyone who refuses to confess Him publicly before men “will be denied before the angels of God” (Lk. 12:8-9). If you reject the deity of the Savior, then you are implicitly accepting the guilty verdict against the Redeemer. You are saying that He was indeed crucified justly. We hope and pray that you would reject such a belief as truly blasphemous.

The trial of Jesus is one of the greatest proofs of Christ’s divinity in Scripture, for He spoke the truth about Himself under oath to God knowing that the truth would lead directly to the bloody cross. If He was what unbelieving Israel said, then he deserved to die as a blasphemer. But, if He was who He claimed to be and who His miracles and glorious resurrection proved Him to be, then we must bow the knee before Him, worship Him, trust in Him and serve Him with the whole heart as the Son of the living God, the Messiah, the Savior of the world. “And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, ‘Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.’ And the four beasts said, ‘Amen.’ And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped Him that liveth forever and ever” (Rev. 5:14).

The Jews Mock and Beat the Messiah

Having convicted the Son of God of blasphemy and condemned Him to death, the Sanhedrin reveals their total corruption, inner depravity and hatred of Jesus by severely abusing Him. “Now the men who held Jesus mocked Him and beat Him. And having blindfolded Him, they struck Him on the face and asked Him, saying, ‘Prophecy! Who is the one who struck You?’ And many other things they blasphemously spoke against Him” (Lk. 22:64-65). Although Luke identifies the men who held Jesus as temple police and palace guards, Matthew and Mark leave open the possibility that members of the Sanhedrin also took part. Mark’s account says “some” (14:65), while Matthew says “they.” Even if the members of the Sanhedrin did not participate in this cruel beating and mocking of Christ, they still were fully responsible for what occurred.

This abuse of our Lord involved a number of things. First, both Mark and Matthew tell us they spit in the Savior’s face (Mk. 14:65; Mt. 26:67). “Spitting is a universal way of expressing contempt and insult.”⁵⁹ When Job describes the great state of his humiliation under his affliction he writes, “They abhor me, they keep far from me; they do not hesitate to spit in my face” (29:10). In Old Testament law the man who refuses to take on the responsibility of Levirate marriage was to be (in the presence of the court) symbolically humiliated by his deceased brother’s wife removing his sandal and spitting in his face (Deut. 25:90). The purpose of the spitting was not merely to express anger but also to demonstrate shame. Therefore, the men who spit in the face of Christ were not only expressing their hatred and contempt toward Jesus but were also seeking to humiliate Him and bring shame upon His name. “It was not enough to have taken prisoner a person of most blameless and charitable life. They must needs add insult to injury.”⁶⁰ To the Jews there was nothing more reproachful and disgraceful than having someone spit in your face. “[T]he Jews say [in the Babylonian Talmud], that he that spits before, or in the

⁵⁹ R. T. France, *Mark*, 617.

⁶⁰ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 441.

presence of his master, is guilty of death, so nauseous and filthy was it accounted; and how much more must it be so, to spit in the face of any one? Hereby a prophecy was fulfilled, Isa. 1.6. *I hid not my face from shame and spitting*: and hereby, together with his sweat and blood, his visage was more marred than any man's, and his form than the sons of men."⁶¹ For wicked men who harbor the most bitter, vindictive and hateful thoughts against our Lord, it is not enough to condemn Him to death unjustly. He must also writhe on the ground like a worm.

Second, they mocked Jesus by covering His eyes, beating Him with their fists and asking Him to prophesy who struck Him. This beating was not merely a slapping with the open hand but a brutal beating with fists and possibly even with sticks (*rapizo* can refer to a beating with a rod or whip). At this point in our Lord's suffering, the Jews are focusing their mockery on the Savior's claim to be the Messiah, "Prophecy unto us thou Christ" (Mt. 26:68), and His ability to prophesy. The Jews mock Jesus in a manner which is unique, which flows from their own apostate worldview. Schilder's comments on this uniqueness are insightful. He writes,

It is for this reason that this particular piece of mockery is to be differentiated from that which overtook the Saviour later in the palace of Pilate, and also from that with which He was afflicted on the hill of the cross. True, after Pilate's sentence also, Jesus was mocked. Simply recall to mind the crown of thorns. And He was made the butt of mockery again in Herod's presence. You remember the gorgeous robe. Moreover, He was mocked even as He hung on the cross itself. Remember the jest-prompted summoning of Elijah, and the way in which the people abused Jesus' *maschil*—His breaking down and rebuilding of the temple.

Each time that mockery recurs, it occupies a different, a unique position in the gospel of the passion. First it is *Israel* that mocks Him; next the world of *heathendom*; then the *false brother*; and finally it is the company of *all these together*. Israel first: the Sanhedrin, judges and servants both. Heathendom next: the soldiers of Pilate, prompted to do so by Pilate himself; in other words, the servants and their patrons. After that the false brother: Herod, who traces his lineage to Edom, that is, to Esau, Jacob's pursuer from long ago even to the present time. And finally, these all acting as a unit mocked Him, when all those who stood around the cross joined in defying the Christ.

Therefore we say that the mockery which Jesus has to endure in the presence of the Sanhedrin occupies a unique place in the account of the passion. He is standing upon the mountain of prophecy. While there He is being degraded by His own people.⁶²

The Jews made a mockery of who the Savior was and what He taught. This was a stinging, cruel rejection of the person of Christ as well as His prophetic role. "There was an ingenuity in the torments inflicted on Jesus worthy of Satan their author.... Perhaps there was a burst of applause when it was first proposed to blindfold those meek and sorrowful eyes, and no doubt a profane laugh was heard, as each blow was struck, and the question was asked, *who is it that smote thee?*"⁶³

How did our Lord respond to the spitting, the blows, the laughter and the insults? According to all the gospel accounts, not one word escaped His lips. There was an amazing silence, calmness and patience. He did not murmur, complain, rebuke or even cry out under the blows and insults. "He was drinking, slowly, with the consciousness of self-surrender, the Cup which His Father had given Him."⁶⁴ He could not rebuke or strike down this depraved rabble,

⁶¹ John Gill, *Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:346.

⁶² Klaas Schilder, *Christ on Trial*, 177.

⁶³ Alfred Nevin, *Popular Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke*, 646.

⁶⁴ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 563.

nor could He cry out for mercy. He regarded every injury, insult, indignity, wrath and hatred as a drop in the cup His Father had given Him to drink. Christ could have identified these men instantly. He could have crushed them to pieces with a word. But the time had come to suffer; He had to continue His descent into the abyss of God's wrath against our sin. It is truly remarkable what Jesus endured to redeem us from our sin and guilt.

This humiliation and suffering of the Savior makes Christianity totally unique among all the world's religions and worldviews. In fact we could say that it is one of the great proofs of the truth of the Bible. Who in their right mind would place the incarnate God within a circle of fists, mockery and laughter? Who would make up a story that the founder of their religion, who was "God of very God," would voluntarily submit to be spit upon as the scum of the earth? This amazing reality that "God was made flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn. 1:14); that the divine-human mediator was hated and rejected by His own people; that He was brutally treated as worse than a dog could never be conceived by sinful mortals. The fact that the Messiah would suffer and die under a curse was a stumbling block to the Jews (1 Cor. 1:23). The suffering of Christ was also emphatically rejected by Islam. The Greeks viewed it as utter foolishness (Ac. 17:32; 1 Cor. 1:23). Yet, it is absolutely true. Our minds could never fathom a Savior as great and noble as the one presented in Scripture. He had to drink of the cup to the bitter dregs in order to rescue us from our sin and folly. He had to descend to the very depths of hell to pull us out of the curse that we so definitely deserved. Hallelujah, what a Savior! Paul speaks of this amazing love in Romans: "For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life" (5:6-10).

There can be no neutrality regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ. Will you place yourself in the unbelieving crowd who mocked the Son of God and spit in His face; or, will you believe in Him and worship Him as the divine King? People, of course, will insist that they would never do the Savior harm. They would never spit in His face, beat Him or mock Him. But, is it not an insult toward the Son of God to say, "I do not need to be saved by Him. I'm not really interested in what He did or has to say. I'm far too busy with the things of life to pay Him any regard?" If you do not believe in Jesus and trust in Him as the Son of God, the Messiah, the Lord over all, then you smite Him. You regard His suffering, death and anguish as something that can be trampled underfoot as worthless. You smite Him in that you impugn His infinite love and His power to save. "Oh! 'Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little.' That suffering man stands in the room, and place, and stead of every one that will believe on him. Trust him! trust him!—you have then accepted him as your God, as your Messiah. Refuse to trust him!—you have smitten him; and you may think it little to do this to-day; but when he rides upon the clouds of heaven you will see your sin in its true light, and you will shudder to think that ever you could have refused him who now reigns 'King of kings and Lord of lords.'"⁶⁵

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⁶⁵ Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Greatest Trial on Record," 9:103.