

The Plot of the Sanhedrin

John 11:45-57

Israel's Governing Body in the 1st Century

The Sanhedrin

The Sanhedrin was comprised of 70 members of Israel's elite among the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They were the wealthy power brokers of Israel's politics. The Sanhedrin functioned much like a congress and a supreme court combined. It made laws, held trials, pursued justice and governed Israel. Its jurisdiction was limited by Roman authority. As long as the Sanhedrin kept peace in Israel they had the freedom to govern Israel. If they could not maintain peace, Roman authorities would step in and violently restore order. The Sanhedrin was free to administer justice amongst its people, with the exception of the death penalty. Any Jew who committed a capital offense in Jewish law, had to be brought to Roman authorities for the death penalty to be carried out. The Sanhedrin would need the support of Rome in carrying out the death penalty against Jesus.

Pharisees

Pharisees were opposed to Jesus because he rejected the teachings of the oral law. They believed they had attained righteousness through adhering to a strict legalism. They were more concerned with "legalities" of God's Law and their own laws than with showing mercy; were pure ceremonially, but not inwardly; created a rift, not peace in Judaism; and certainly did not possess true righteousness.¹ The Pharisees that come into conflict with Jesus were ones who outwardly worshipped God, but inwardly pursued the power, prestige and wealth of their position in society. Their motivations were selfish, and more concerned with protecting their reputation than shepherding the flock of Israel to which they were entrusted.

Sadducees

They were more concerned with peace with Rome in order that nothing threatens their position or wealth. The Sadducees controlled the temple and the sacrificial system. All of Israel had to come through them to worship and sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem. All temple taxes, money exchanges, and sacrificial animals had to be purchased at the temple. Jesus was a threat to their position and wealth.²

¹ Bible Knowledge Commentary

² Holman Bible Dictionary

The power of the Pharisees came from the general approval and respect of the people of Israel, while the Sadducees received their power from control of the Temple and compromise with Roman authorities. They were united by their fear of Jesus upsetting their own power bases, or worse yet, Jesus coming to the attention of the Roman authorities as an insurrectionist leading the people in a massive revolt. The Roman response would be to completely squash the rebellion removing all power from the hands of the Sanhedrin and essentially destroying Israel as a nation. This is exactly what would happen in 70AD with the fall of Jerusalem.

The High Priest

Caiaphas was the High priest that year (v49). Traditionally, the position of High Priest was hereditary from the line of Aaron and family of Zadok (from the time of King David). By the time of Jesus, it was position "owned" by the Romans and sold/appointed to someone willing to work with Roman authorities, and control Israel on behalf of the Roman authorities in Jerusalem.

The Plot



John 11: 45-57

Jesus' works and words caused two reactions: belief or fear. The people of Israel were beginning to put their faith in him as either a messiah like David, or those who came to know him, saw him as something else indeed – the Son of God, but they still didn't understand what that meant. For the religious authorities, Jesus caused great fear.

"If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him..." (John 11:48a)

Up to this point, the inaction of the Sanhedrin has led to confusion for the populace. At the Feast of Tabernacles Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, and no one among the religious authorities stopped him or refuted him³. Where ever Jesus goes, he draws a crowd. He is popular with the people of Israel. They want to believe he is the Messiah, a King David come to liberate them from the tyranny of Rome. He attracts so many people the Religious Leaders fear he will draw the attention of the Roman authorities. They fear that the Roman authorities will view him as a revolutionary, an insurrectionist, a threat to Roman peace. If he draws the Romans' attention, he will also draw their wrath.

³ See John 7:25-27

*"...and then the Romans will come and take away both our **place** and our **nation**." John 11:48b*

In this passage "place" refers to position, both personal position as well as political position. The Intended place or position is as shepherd, as we learned from the Ezekiel passage, Ezekiel 34:1-12. God anointed them for their position as a religious ruler over Israel. They were supposed to be Israel's shepherd. The High Priest is supposed to be the head shepherd. The other leaders also are shepherds over Israel. Caiaphas is the High Priest; he is supposed to be the head shepherd ensuring the well being of God's people. But this is not the position for which the Sanhedrin is concerned. They are much more concerned over their personal position and their political position.

Personal position relates to the power, wealth, and prestige of the individual members of the ruling counsel. Caiaphas is concerned for his and his family's position because it brings him wealth, power, security. It brings him the lifestyle his heart desires. He is ambitious and will not permit anyone to come between himself and his lifestyle. He will kill an innocent man who has proven himself time and time again to be exactly who and what he claims to be: the long awaited Messiah. Caiaphas knows *what* he's going to do to ensure the security of his position. Now he just has to work out the details in a way that will not disrupt either the Jewish population enamored with him, or the Roman authorities who will not tolerate any threat to peace, or possible insurrection.

Political position: Refers to Israel's limited self-governance. Limited freedom and self-governance is better than none. If the Roman authorities have to come in and put down an uprising it will not only be bloody, but it will be the end of even what little freedom they have as a nation *subject* to Rome. They will become a nation *enslaved* to Rome if they fail to keep peace.

The Sanhedrin's fear of losing the nation has to do with political control over Israel. The Sanhedrin is walking a fine line between self-governance and full Roman governance. We have the luxury of looking ahead in history to what happened in 70 AD when there was a Jewish uprising and Rome mercilessly crushed it. Jerusalem was destroyed and its people, if not killed, were carried off as slaves and dispersed throughout the Roman Empire. As Jesus prophesied, not a stone was left standing. The Nation of Israel came to an end not to be brought back (miraculously) until 1948.

Not only would the religious leaders lose their personal and political positions, but also very likely their lives. From a secular standpoint, they had every reason to fear Jesus. Jesus threatened their lifestyle and taught a message they could not accept: that the role of a leader required service and sacrifice for those they lead, not entitlement and a privileged life at the expense of those they were to lead.

"You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." John 11:50

Caiaphas could have no idea of the irony his own words spoke! What one man will do for his selfish purposes, God will use to deliver his own people. Caiaphas embarks on an "ends-justifies-the-means" plan of arresting and killing Jesus in order to prevent the Romans from destroying any possible insurrection. Caiaphas' plan was clearly selfish, but it serves to contrast sharply with the example of Jesus of loving, self-sacrifice willing to die to save his flock. Jesus came as the Good Shepherd. He said, *"I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep....I know my sheep and they know me...and I lay down my life for the sheep."* (John 10:11-12, 14-16).

We know also the accusations against the religious leaders for not being the good shepherds they were chosen to be. Their religious office placed them in the position of shepherding Israel, but instead they chose to abuse their position to serve themselves. The Ezekiel passage promises that God will not let these false shepherds continue to harm the flock of Israel. God will bring his own shepherd to replace them.⁴

Returning to our passage of study in John 11, verse 51 tells us that God used the High Priest to prophesy Jesus' death on behalf of the Jewish nation, and the scattered children of God, the Diaspora. God's plan was to draw in all of his sheep; and he used the hard hearted Jews to bring it about. We are told that from this point on the Sanhedrin plotted the death of Jesus. The Sanhedrin's plot fulfilled God's salvation plan.

Verse 55 gives us the timing of the culmination of the Sanhedrin's plot: Passover. For the Jews, Passover represented the death of lambs and the birth of their nation through the freedom of the Exodus. John the Baptist's prophecy was about to come to fulfillment: "The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" (John 1:29). The Lamb who had been sent by God was about to die.

"But intriguingly John notes that the people had come to "sanctify" or "cleanse" themselves while their leaders had indelibly stained themselves as they ruthlessly plotted the death of the blameless Son of God."—New American Commentary

Matthew 26:2-5 gives us a few details to add insight to these events. In verse 2 we have Jesus telling his disciples what will happen in the next few days. Then the religious leaders come together in a parallel account of what we have been reading today. We are told

"...they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him."

The word translated "sly" is the Greek word *"dolos"* meaning, a trick, a bait; to us craft, deceit, guile, subtility.⁵ They could not justly and openly arrest Jesus. He had not broken any laws. They would do it covertly, in the darkness of night. They let the darkness provide cover for their evil deeds.

⁴ Ezekiel 34:1-24

⁵ Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary

"But not during the Feast," they said, "or there may be a riot among the people." (Matt 26:4-5)

They also feared the reaction of the people coming to Jerusalem for Passover. They could not publicly arrest Jesus without drawing attention from the crowds, and possibly a riot. The memory of Antiochus Epiphanes iron-fisted rule over Israel had not yet faded into the depths of history. The Jewish historian Josephus describes a similar tumult in the previous century that made these fears well-grounded. In response to an uprising of the Jews, it was reported:

"Antiochus Epiphanes was not satisfied either with his unexpected taking the city, or with its pillage, or with the great slaughter he had made there; but being overcome with his violent passions, and remembering what he had suffered during the siege, he compelled the Jews to dissolve the laws of their country, and to keep their infants uncircumcised, and to sacrifice swine's flesh upon the altar; against which they all opposed themselves, and the most approved among them were put to death." —The Wars of the Jews

An uprising of the people of Israel would surely bring the wrath of Rome upon Israel, a fate the Sanhedrin feared more than God it would seem.

"But the chief priests and Pharisees had given orders that if anyone found out where Jesus was, he should report it so that they might arrest him." John 11:57