

Throughout history, many trials have been called “the trial of the century.” The trial of Socrates and the Scopes Monkey trial are prime examples. But there is one trial that is more than just “the trial of the century”; it is the most famous trial in all history. This trial revealed man’s viewpoint of the Son of God. The destiny of all men who have ever lived or will live is inseparably linked to its outcome. It is the trial of Jesus the Messiah.

*Then were gathered together the chief priests, and the elders of the people, unto the court of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas; and they took counsel together that they might take Jesus by subtlety, and kill him. But they said, Not during the feast, lest a tumult arise among the people.*  
(Matthew 26:3-5, ASV)

Jesus was tried before a kangaroo court, and the proceedings arose out of the conspiracy revealed in Matthew 26:3-5. The conspiracy included both Pharisees (*the elders of the people*) and Sadducees (*the chief priests*). These were two opposing religious camps in Jewish society, and there was great bitterness between them. But at this time, they had one thing in common: animosity towards Jesus. He refused to uphold the traditions of either the Pharisees or the Sadducees, and they hated Him for it. This hatred gave rise to a conspiracy against Him. It was led by Caiaphas, the High Priest. The plan was to arrest Jesus in secret, away from the attention of the masses, and kill Him before the people became aware of what had happened.

*Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went unto the chief priests, and said, What are ye willing to give me, and I will deliver him unto you? And they weighed unto him thirty pieces of silver. And from that time he sought opportunity to deliver him unto them.* (Matthew 26:14-16, ASV)

The parallel Gospel accounts, Mark 14:11 and Luke 22:5, point out that the conspirators were glad when Judas offered them an opportunity to apprehend Jesus. They quickly made a promise to pay him for his services. The amount agreed upon was thirty pieces of silver. Judas was paid out of the Temple treasury with funds designated for the purchase of sacrifices. Little did the conspirators know that they were indeed purchasing a sacrifice with Temple money, for when the Messiah died, He died as the sin sacrifice for all men.

The thirty pieces of silver had further meaning. According to Exodus 21:32, this was the monetary value of a dead slave. If a man’s ox gored a neighbor’s slave to death, the owner of the ox was to pay the owner of the slave thirty pieces of silver. Thus, the leaders of Israel held the ministry of the Messiah to be the value of a slave. Yet, these leaders unwittingly fulfilled a prophecy in the Hebrew Scriptures. Zechariah 11:12 clearly states that Messiah’s price would be thirty pieces of silver.

The Messiah underwent two trials, each having three phases. The first was the religious trial, and the charge was blasphemy; the second was the civil trial, where the charge was sedition. In this tract, our focus will be on the religious trial.

By the time of the Messiah, Judaism had developed a large body of law controlling every facet of Jewish life. In the Scriptures this is referred to as *the tradition of the elders* (Mark 7:3). Within this massive body of law were the commandments that dealt with the manner in which the Sanhedrin was to conduct a trial. The main issue the Pharisees and Sadducees had with the Messiah was His refusal to accept the traditions of the elders as being authoritative and binding. Yet, they themselves were guilty of the very thing for which they condemned the Messiah. In trying to bring about the speedy execution of the Messiah through a kangaroo court, they violated a number of their own laws!

The twenty-two judicial laws of the Sanhedrin that were broken at Messiah’s trial are as follows:

1. There was to be no arrest by religious authorities that was accomplished by a bribe (Exodus 23:8).
2. There were to be no actions in criminal proceedings after sunset.
3. Judges or Sanhedrin members were not allowed to participate in the arrest.
4. There were to be no trials before the morning sacrifice.
5. There were to be no secret trials, only public.
6. Sanhedrin trials could only be conducted in the Hall of Judgment of the Temple compound.
7. The procedure was to be first the defense and then the accusation.
8. All may argue in favor of acquittal, but all may not argue in favor of conviction.
9. There were to be two or three witnesses, and their testimonies had to agree in every detail (Deut. 19:15).
10. The accused could not testify against himself.
11. The high priest was forbidden to rend his garments (Leviticus 21:10).
12. Charges could not originate with the judges. The judges could only investigate charges brought to them.
13. The accusation of blasphemy was only valid if the name of God itself was pronounced.
14. A person could not be condemned on the basis of his own words alone.
15. The verdict could not be announced at night, only in the daytime.
16. In cases of capital punishment, the trial and guilty verdict could not occur at the same time but must be separated by at least 24 hours.
17. Voting for the death penalty had to be done by individual count beginning with the youngest so the young would not be influenced by the elders.
18. A unanimous decision for guilt shows innocence since it is impossible for 23-71 men to agree without plotting.
19. The sentence could only be pronounced three days after the guilty verdict.
20. A person condemned to death could not be beaten or scourged beforehand.
21. Judges were to be humane and kind.
22. No trials were allowed on the eve of the Sabbath or on a feast day.

The first law listed here was clearly broken when Judas was paid to betray Jesus. As you read the following synopsis of the biblical record of the religious trial and the accounts in the Gospels, see if you can spot where the remainder of the above laws were broken.

Jesus was arrested at night in the garden of Gethsemane. Judas was accompanied by a multitude that included the chief priests and the elders (Mark 14:43). The first of the three phases of the religious trial was before Annas (John 18:12-14, 19-23). The purpose of this particular trial was to establish a religious charge upon which the Messiah could be tried in a Sanhedrin court of law. The first phase of the religious trial was very short. It ended in failure, for it produced no specific charge. As a result, Annas gave up and sent Jesus to Caiaphas for the second phase of the religious trial (Luke 22:54).

Members of the Sanhedrin came into Caiaphas' house, ready to try the Messiah. The Sanhedrin was composed of 71 men; 24 were chief priests, 24 were elders, 22 were scribes, and one was the high priest. For the Sanhedrin to have a legal trial, there had to be a minimum of 23 members present, and there is little doubt that they had at least that many. However, the entire 71 were not present, for it is clear from the record in the Gospels that two of the members were absent: Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea (John 19:38-42).

The initial stage of the second phase of the religious trial began with the seeking of witnesses (Mark 14:55-56). After several attempts, the religious leaders managed to come up with two witnesses whom they thought had corroborating testimonies (Mark 14:58). But as the second witness spoke, he gave a slightly different account from the first (Matthew 26:61; Mark 14:59).

By now, Caiaphas was frustrated and wished to take the matter into his own hands. He challenged Jesus to respond to the accusations against Him (Matthew 26:62). The Messiah stuck to His rights as a defendant and refused to answer. It was at this point that Caiaphas placed Jesus under oath (Matthew 26:63). When Jesus affirmed His Messiahship (Matthew 26:64), the Sanhedrin responded by breaking a number of commandments (Matthew 26:65-68). The second phase of the religious trial ended in mockery and with the second of several mistreatments of the Messiah (Luke 22:63-65).

The final phase of the religious trial was only an attempt to legalize an illegal proceeding, but nothing could rectify the many illegalities that had taken place in the first two phases (Luke 22:66-71). This very attempt to legalize an illegal proceeding was filled with further illegalities.

With this, the religious trial of Messiah came to an end. The charge was blasphemy (Mark 14:64), which, under Jewish law, carried with it the death penalty. However, according to Roman law, the Jews could not carry out the execution.

*He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. (Isaiah 53:7, NIV)*

The "Magdalen" Papyrus  
Greek fragments of the Gospel of Matthew  
(Chapter 26:23 and 31)



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11926 Radium Street  
San Antonio, Texas 78216-2713  
Phone: 210-344-7707  
WWW.ARIEL.ORG

ARIEL THOUGHT TRACT



## THE TRIAL OF THE CENTURIES

A teaching of  
Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum