
The Sanhedrin

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The rise of this great council of the Hebrews took place in the time of Greek supremacy, though there has been some attempt to trace its origins to the council of seventy elders named by Moses. The first mention of the Sanhedrin is in the time of Antiochus the Great (223-187 B.C.) It was evidently an aristocratic body, with the high priest acting as president. When the Roman order was introduced by Pompey, the high priest still retained the position of governor of the nation, making it likely that the Sanhedrin was carrying on.

Herod the Great began his reign by ordering the whole of the Sanhedrin put to death, appointing his own council of elders in their place. Under the Roman pro-curators, the internal government of the country was in the hands of the Sanhedrin to a much greater extent. And in the time of Christ and the apostles, the Sanhedrin is frequently mentioned as being the supreme Jewish court of justice. The Sanhedrin was abolished after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

The Organization of the Sanhedrin

The Sanhedrin was composed of 71 priests who served for life and who were selected from the following:

- The acting high priest presided over the council; all former high priests were members.
- Male members of the high priestly families
- Scribes, legal assessors, bureaucrats
- Pharisees and Sadducees
- Elders - tribal and family heads

Criminal judges were members of the Sanhedrin, and twenty-three of them sat in judgment, with two clerks to record votes for acquittal and conviction. In capital cases, argument for acquittal was heard first, then those in favor of conviction. Anyone who had spoken in favor of the accused could not then speak against him; but one who had spoken against the accused could

change his testimony in his favor. Sentence for acquittal could be pronounced immediately; but sentence for conviction was reserved for the next day.

In voting, each member stood, beginning with the youngest. A simple majority was sufficient for acquittal; but a majority of at least two votes was required for conviction. More members of the Sanhedrin would be brought in two at a time to vote whenever there was a majority of only one for conviction. When all 71 had voted, the person was acquitted if there was still a majority of only one.

Jesus appeared before the Sanhedrin on a charge of blasphemy (Matt. 26:65; John 19:7). Peter and John were charged with being false prophets and deceivers of the people (Acts 4 and 5), Stephen with being a blasphemer (Acts 6:13 ff), and Paul with being guilty of transgressing the Mosaic law (Acts 23).

The Sanhedrin had the right of ordering arrests by its own officers; of finally disposing of such cases as did not involve capital punishment. A sentence of death had to be ratified by the Roman procurator.

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