

"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Romans 11:5)

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THE SANHEDRIN AND A SECOND CHANCE FOR JUSTICE

by Galen Peterson

The highest judicial body of Israel in biblical times was the Sanhedrin. It was not an institution ordained by God, but it was formed during the second temple period. The name is derived from a Greek word meaning "sitting together." It reflects the way that judges in the Ancient Near East gave their decisions while sitting down. In the New Testament, it is translated as "Sanhedrin, council or court."

Many of the details about the Sanhedrin are found in the *Mishnah*, which is the written form of the Oral Law that was known during the second temple period. It describes the council as being comprised of 71 men, including current and former high priests, and members from the Sadducees and Pharisees who were knowledgeable in *halakah* (the legal portion of the Torah). The Sanhedrin convened in what was called the Chamber of Hewn Stone, which was built into the northern wall of the temple.

They made decisions with national significance, like going to war or issues related to entire tribes. They dealt with charges against false prophets or the high priest, and made decisions about alterations to the temple. We also know that on the last day of His life, Yeshua (Jesus) was tried and found guilty by the Sanhedrin before He was tried again under Roman law by Pontius Pilate, which led to His crucifixion.

The Talmud records a very interesting statement:

"Forty years before the destruction of the Temple, the Sanhedrin was banished [from the Chamber of Hewn Stone] and sat in the trade hall" (*Shabbat 15a*)

The trade hall was an area on the temple mount where shopping took place and was apparently the only site available when they had to move. But the question is, why did they have to abandon such a prestigious location on the temple mount?

The ancient writings reveal

that during the same time period, the thirty-ton lintel over the doorway to the temple crashed to the ground and was destroyed. So what could cause such damage to the Temple and also apparently destroyed the chamber where the Sanhedrin met? Or to put it another way, what happened 40 years before the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D.?

We are told in the gospels that at the moment Yeshua died on the cross, a great earthquake struck the land (Mat 27:51). It shook so violently that it tore the massive veil in the temple that set apart the holy place from the rest of the structure. So it makes sense that it would be the same kind of shaking that would permanently damage the meeting place of the body that passed judgment on Yeshua leading to His death.

After that time, they were then forced to meet in a far less holy location on the southern fringe of the temple mount where a 900 ft. long open-air basilica

served in part as a shopping mall. Then they were relocated a second time to a place in Jerusalem outside the temple area altogether.

After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the Romans allowed the Sanhedrin to continue meeting in the town of Yavneh, near the Mediterranean coast. It moved seven more times, with its final location at Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee where it remained until it was dissolved in 425 A.D.

There is much symbolic significance in the way this story developed. The Sanhedrin was used by God as part of His redemptive plan for humanity. But then it was judged by God for its role in condemning Yeshua, the righteous Son of God. So it was pushed further and further away from God's holiness. It went from a body with genuine authority to manipulative power, and finally to no authority and power at all. Surely there is no coincidence that its demise all started with their decision that Yeshua had to die because they perceived Him to be a threat to their power.

1600 years have since passed. During those many centuries, observant Jews have recited the *Amidah* prayer three times a day, saying: "Restore our judges as in former times and our counselors as in the days of old." So the hope for restoring the Sanhedrin was never lost.

Then in 2004 some rabbinical leaders decided to restore the Sanhedrin themselves. They held a ceremony at the last place where the council met in Tiberias, and reestablished the ruling body. Since that time, they have made these rulings and actions:

- In 2005 they ruled that the Temple either stood on the site of the Dome of the Rock or just north of it, where it lines up directly with the eastern gate.

- Later that same year they called for preparations for a new temple, beginning with the preparation of architectural designs and plans for a prefabricated building to be stored and ready for rapid assembly.
- On the eve of Passover, 2016 they obtained a flock of sheep to be used for sacrifice.
- In July they ruled that this year is the beginning of the counting of the jubilee cycle, which means 50 years from now, all debts would need to be forgiven, and land returned to the original owner, according to tribal inheritance (assuming the people of Israel can figure out within 50 years how to make it work in modern society).
- In September they sought to appoint Rabbi Baruch Kahane to the esteemed biblical position of High Priest. Ultimately they settled for a semi-biblical position of Head of the Priests, which would allow him to step into the role of High Priest quickly if circumstances quickly change and temple services are able to resume in Jerusalem, which is a high priority for many ultra-Orthodox Jews.

The point is that an increasing number of Orthodox Jews in Israel, which is the fastest growing group in the country, are becoming more active in practicing Judaism in the way it was done in second

temple times. But the re-emergence of this preliminary form of the Sanhedrin also serves as a reminder of the value that the Bible, and thus God, places on justice.

In biblical times the Sanhedrin was called to abide by a legal code that was derived from Scripture and the Oral Law. So the Sanhedrin that put Yeshua on trial had well-established principles to uphold. But the problem with justice is that it is easily ignored when you have the power to abuse it. And that is what they did. The violations of their own standards were numerous:

- The leaders of the Sanhedrin violated Exodus 23:8 by bribing Judas for an act of betrayal (Mat 26:14-16). That should have made the arrest illegal and invalidated the authority of the judges.
- After His arrest, Yeshua was taken before the high priest Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin for a trial that took place at night (Mat 26:57-59). But the Sanhedrin had established a rule that it could only conduct trials during the time between the morning and evening burnt offerings, which took place at 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m.
- Capital cases could not be conducted in one day, in order to allow for the possibility of witnesses or evidence being presented that exonerates the



The new Sanhedrin meets in Tiberias, Israel

accused. That rule was a reflection of Exodus 23:7 that protected the execution of those who are actually innocent.

- Trying serious cases was forbidden right before the Sabbath or feasts, both of which were true when Yeshua was tried. Capital cases with a guilty verdict were to be carried out quickly. But burial in that culture also had to be done within 24 hours of death, except never on the Sabbath or a feast because of defilement of the day. So that required postponing a trial until after the Sabbath or feast, which the Sanhedrin did not do regarding Yeshua because they were rushing the process secretly in order to prevent a proper defense.
- The case against Yeshua was based on false testimony. Several false witnesses came forward, but each one came with a different fictitious claim, so as Mark 14:56 records, “their testimony was not consistent.” That point alone should have produced an acquittal, because, according to their own rules, the disqualification of a witness invalidated *all* of the evidence against the accused.
- Another false claim was made by two witnesses who said that Yeshua was going to destroy the temple of God. The actual statement He made was: “Destroy *this* temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” So He never threatened to destroy the temple, and He was merely speaking about His own death and resurrection metaphorically (John 2:19-21). What made the process illegal was the Sanhedrin’s prevention of any cross-examination of the witnesses, or being able to provide witnesses for the

defense who could impeach the testimony of the witnesses for the prosecution. No doubt there were many people who could have backed up what Yeshua was saying, but they never got the chance.

- The Sanhedrin attempted to force Him to testify, which was a violation of their own rule prohibiting self-incrimination.
- Then they entirely ignored their charge against Him about destroying the temple, and they pursued a completely different charge by asking Him if He was the Messiah and the Son of God (Mat 26:63). The Sanhedrin interpreted His affirmative response as blasphemy. But in the Torah, that violation required speaking evil against God and cursing Him (Lev 24:10-16), which Yeshua did not do. Legally Yeshua could only be convicted of blasphemy if there was additional evidence supporting the charge besides His supposed self-incrimination.
- They were required to give an opportunity for defense witnesses to speak. In other words, Yeshua should have been able to call witnesses who could testify about His teachings and deeds for the previous three years, and then the Sanhedrin could compare the evidence against what the *Tanakh* (Old Testament) declared about the Messiah. But Matthew 26:65 shows that He was never given that opportunity. Instead, the Sanhedrin convicted Him right on the spot.

These are just a few of the violations by the Sanhedrin of their own standards. So not only was Yeshua innocent of the charges against him, but the very process itself was illegal. And

ironically, the only ones guilty of a crime were those who committed the bribe, suborned false testimony, and the high priest Caiaphas who tore his clothes at the end of the trial, because the Torah prohibited the high priest from tearing his clothes in anger, since it showed a harmful attitude toward other people (Lev. 10:6; 21:10). And doing that was punishable by death.

As far as the modern Sanhedrin is concerned, a relevant question is whether they would be willing to address the greatest abuse of justice in their own history—the trial of Yeshua. How would they respond if a new trial was held? Could Yeshua get a second chance for justice?

In the late 1920’s a group of American Christians who were dedicated to the salvation of the Jewish people, became convinced that Yeshua had the Sanhedrin in mind when He said “from now on you will not see Me until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’” (Mat 23:39). In other words, according to David Cooper, spokesman for the group, Yeshua was saying:

“you the Sanhedrin, guides of the nation, will never see my face until you reverse your decision, turn the sentiment of the people to me, and say that the one who comes in the name of the Lord, as I have done, is blessed. When you arrive at this decision I will return.”

David L. Cooper
The New Sanhedrin

In 1929 the group began making preparations to call for the re-establishment of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, and for a re-trial of Yeshua. They laid out a detailed plan how it would come about, and they had a respected

Messianic Jew who would serve as their lawyer at the trial. They also organized the defense that would be argued on behalf of Yeshua. They even went so far as formulating an invitation to the Jewish communities of the world to reconstitute the Sanhedrin, and they began publicizing their cause.

We do not know exactly when this all ended. Perhaps the crash of the stock market later that year and the beginning of the Great Depression was a factor. But their plan just faded away.

It does raise the question, however, of what would happen if a new trial could occur, especially now that the Sanhedrin has been revived. If Yeshua was given the opportunity for justice that was denied to Him 2,000 years ago, what would His defense be?

Surely witnesses could be offered who might be able to describe the actual events of His life using the record of the gospels, thus impeaching the false testimony of the first trial. And the prophetic portrait of the Messiah as detailed in the Old Testament and fulfilled in Yeshua's life, could be demonstrated. You might hear words to the effect, "The defense submits into evidence the 53rd chapter of the book of Isaiah," and so on.

And no doubt, with a bright light cast onto the proceedings, it would be much more difficult to

manipulate the results, like it was done the first time under the cover of darkness. You might even envision the possibility of a different verdict this time that Yeshua was innocent of the charges. But I also suspect that given the opportunity to express His will on the matter, Yeshua would say, "Don't take it to trial. I don't need man's vindication. Let the verdict stand."

You see, the condemnation of Yeshua, in spite of His innocence, was part of God's plan of redemption. As the prophet Isaiah foretold: "By oppression and judgment He was taken away" (Isa 53:8). Yet "He had done no violence" (v. 9). But it was not *His* sin that needed judgment and atonement, it was *ours*. Again, as Isaiah foretold: "the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him" (v. 6).

In that regard, Yeshua had to live a perfectly righteous life, deserving of innocence, yet needing to be found guilty on our behalf. That required a trial characterized by what Moses called "perverted justice" (Ex 23:6). Thus, in their perversion, the Sanhedrin was God's agent of true justice on behalf of all who believe in Messiah Yeshua.

Because of that reality, believers in Yeshua have much to rejoice about. And we can marvel at the way that God carries out His

redemptive plan, even using unrighteous acts like that of the Sanhedrin, for His purposes and His glory.

Let us all recognize that a day is coming when Yeshua will return. Only this time, He will come not as the wrongly convicted victim, but as the judge. And unlike human beings, He will administer true justice. For those people who do not recognize His authority today, it will be the ultimate form of condemnation and there will be no second chance for them when He returns. That second chance only exists now when we turn to Him in faith.

And thankfully, for those who have been redeemed by grace through faith in Yeshua, it is a judgment that exonerates us completely. How blessed it is to be pardoned and set free from the consequences of sin forever.



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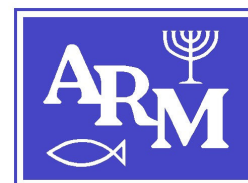
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