NOT UNLIKE BEING CALLED for an audit with the IRS, being summoned before the Sanhedrin usually did not portend a positive experience in the New Testament era. This negative implication is clearly the case when early church leaders such as Peter, James, Stephen, and Paul were brought before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4–7; 22–24). What was the Sanhedrin, its history and makeup, and what were its responsibilities?

The Sanhedrin was the supreme council of New Testament Judaism, conducting judicial and legislative functions related to a wide range of political and religious affairs. The word “Sanhedrin” comes from the Greek word *synedrion*, which means “place of those who sit together,” “council,” or “assembly.” In the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, Proverbs 24:7 and 26:26 use the word *synedrion* in the general sense of an assembly or council.¹

**Origin and History**

The council of 70 elders Moses appointed (Num. 11:16), later reorganized by Ezra after the Babylonian exile, provided a model for the Sanhedrin and other leadership groups within Judaism. Some Jews pointed back to Moses’ 70 elders as the first Sanhedrin, but this early group’s role and function were quite different from the Sanhedrin in the New Testament era. The first appearance of an organization similar to the Sanhedrin of the New Testament came about 200 B.C. during the reign of Syria’s King Antiochus III, who created a Senate (Greek: *gerousia*) in Jerusalem.² This group originally consisted only of aristocratic priests and elders (who...
favored the Sadducees), but Queen Alexandra (76-67 B.C.) added the scribes (who favored the Pharisees) to the Senate. The Greek New Testament uses this word *gerousia* in describing “the Sanhedrin—the full Senate of the sons of Israel” (Acts 5:21, HCSB). Some suggest this verse could refer to two separate groups (the Sanhedrin and the Senate), but the better evidence suggests the Sanhedrin functioned as the Senate of Israel.

In Josephus’s writings, the Sanhedrin makes its first appearance in the form known also in the New Testament. He described when Gabinius, the Roman governor of Syria, created five Sanhedrins in Israel in 57 B.C. Josephus also relayed that during the Hasmonean era (165–63 B.C.), the Sanhedrin became involved in a political dispute between King Herod and Hyrcanus, the ethnarch of Judea.³

The Sanhedrin reached the pinnacle of its power during later second temple Judaism, which would have included the New Testament era. After the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, the Sanhedrin reconstituted in Jamnia and then migrated to several other locations. The body had lost its political authority and could determine only religious matters. When the Romans abolished the office of president of the Sanhedrin in the fifth century, the Sanhedrin came to an end. Although some persons later attempted to reconstitute the Sanhedrin, these efforts never gained a strong following in Judaism.⁴

**In the New Testament**

The Greek word for “Sanhedrin” appears 22 times in the New Testament, including 5 references in the Gospels and 14 references in the Book of Acts (although some English translations sometimes translate *synedrion* differently, such as “council”). Many additional New Testament verses reference members of the Sanhedrin by the subgroup of the Sanhedrin with which they were aligned—the chief priests, scribes, and elders.

The New Testament usually presents the Sanhedrin in a negative light. For instance, Jesus warned His disciples they would experience persecution at the hands

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Right: At Jerusalem, the tomb of the Sanhedrin houses three levels of catacombs. The Sanhedrin was the governing body of the Jews in the Greek and Roman periods. Jesus was brought before a hastily-called Sanhedrin for trial.

Below: Ramathaim, the home of Joseph of Arimathea.
of the Sanhedrin (Matt. 10:17; Mark 13:39). Additionally, the Sanhedrin was concerned about Jesus’ miracles, both because these signs attested to His divinity and because the Sanhedrin feared that the Roman government would kill many of the people of Jerusalem if their excitement about Jesus’ miracles led them to talk of crowning Jesus as king. Following the leadership of the high priest Caiaphas, the Sanhedrin saw Jesus’ popularity as a dangerous menace and actively began seeking ways to kill Jesus (Luke 22:49–54; John 11:47–53). Jesus was led, therefore, before members of the Sanhedrin after His arrest in Gethsemane. The Sanhedrin attempted to solicit false witnesses against Jesus to trump up charges against Him (Matt. 26:57–66; Mark 14:53–64). The Sanhedrin handed Jesus over to Pilate to get his approval to crucify Him (15:1).

The Sanhedrin typically held their meetings in the chamber of hewed stone, which was on the western side of the temple mount.5 The Sanhedrin never met on Sabbath days or feast days. Sentencing in capital cases could not be done on the same day as the trial or on the eve of a Sabbath or festival. Meetings were normally held during the daytime, and capital cases in particular could not be tried at night. The New Testament highlights that each of these procedural steps was violated in Jesus’ trial. The Sanhedrin met at the high priest’s house rather than the temple; the trial took place during the Passover observance; the trial took place at night; and the death sentence was determined the same night.6

The Sanhedrin was also involved in trials of several leaders of the early church. Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin and instructed not to preach or do miracles in Christ’s name (Acts 4:5–22; 5:17–41). The apostles refused to do what the Sanhedrin asked. Stephen was also hauled before the Sanhedrin. Angered by Stephen’s sermon to them, the religious leaders stoned him to death (6:11–7:60). Paul was also brought before the Sanhedrin, beginning the legal proceedings that ultimately led to his Roman imprisonment (23:6–10).

Although the Sanhedrin usually played a negative role with regard to Jesus and the early church, in a few instances we see some Sanhedrin members in a more favorable light. Jesus said anyone who calls a person “Raca” is guilty of a crime just as serious as the murder cases the Sanhedrin heard (Matt. 5:21–22). Also, two Sanhedrin members became advocates of Jesus and the church—or at least were more moderate in their attitudes than their colleagues. Joseph of Arimathea, who offered his cave as a burial place for Jesus, was a member of the Sanhedrin (Matt. 27:57–60; Mark 15:43–46). Further, when apostles were brought before the court, Sanhedrin member Gamaliel advised the council not to oppose the early church (Acts 5:34–39).

### Organization and Membership

The Mishnah prescribed that the Sanhedrin was to have 71 members—70 members plus the high priest, who served as president and convener of the group (Mark 14:53; Acts 24:1). All members were to be of pure Israelite descent. Membership appears to have been gained by appointment rather than election, perhaps by the chief priest. History offers no details, however, about the precise process of how Sanhedrin vacancies were filled. Further, we know of no special training for membership in the Sanhedrin beyond the requirement that the Sanhedrin be made up of the leading Jews in Jerusalem, men who would have had access to the best rabbinical training available. “Actual admission was through the laying on of hands.”7

The Sanhedrin in the New Testament era consisted of three distinct subgroups—the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders (Matt. 27:41; Mark 11:27; 14:43). The chief priests (note the plural) were of priestly lineage and aristocratic in heritage. The New Testament almost invariably lists them first, indicating their leadership role. The chief priests were affiliated with the Sadducees. The elders were either priests or wealthy lay leaders who also were of aristocratic heritage and Sadducean leaning. The scribes favored the Pharisees.

Paul exploited the division between Sadducees and Pharisees to avoid being sentenced during his trial before the Sanhedrin (Acts 22:29–23:10). When Paul identified himself with the Pharisees and stated he was being tried for believing in the resurrection (affirmed by the Pharisees but rejected by the Sadducees), the Sanhedrin was thrown into such conflict that they could take no further action (23:6–10).

History clearly distinguishes the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem from the lesser sanhedrins in many cities. The Mishnah prescribed that each town with at least 120 Jewish men should have a local Sanhedrin of 23 members. Perhaps these numerous sanhedrins were the ones that Jesus referred to as agents of persecution of His disciples (Matt. 10:17; Mark 13:9).8 The Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, however, was the single final authority in Jewish life. While most sources identify the high priest as the one who presided over the Sanhedrin, some rabbinical and Talmudic sources describe the Sanhedrin as an assembly of sages headed by two Pharisaic scholars, a president and a vice-president (or chancellor). Biblical scholars have attempted to reconcile these two depictions of the Sanhedrin. Some have suggested that there were actually three Sanhedrins of 23 members—a priestly, Pharisaic, and aristocratic Sanhedrin—that occasionally met together to form the Great Sanhedrin. Others propose that two Sanhedrins existed—one
political and one religious. The majority of scholars believe, however, the one Great Sanhedrin performed political, religious, and judicial functions.9

**Function and Duties**

The Sanhedrin’s structure and function evolved over the years as the council adapted to changing political realities. However, at its height of power in later second-temple Judaism, the Sanhedrin had judicial, legislative, political, and religious functions. The judicial functions seemed to be the Sanhedrin’s predominant role. The Great Sanhedrin was the final court of appeals and thus rendered a final opinion on all matters of interpretation of the Law as it related to daily life.

The Sanhedrin in its judicial role could try a whole tribe, a false prophet, or even national figures such as the high priest. In much of its history, the Sanhedrin had the power to try and execute cases involving sentences of capital punishment. This power was taken away, however, during the period of the Roman procurators (John 18:31). This is why the Sanhedrin took Jesus to Pilate; they could not give Him the death sentence by stoning. So they sought crucifixion from the Roman authorities. In the case of Stephen, the Sanhedrin actually did carry out a death sentence by stoning, although the text is not clear whether this was a deliberate action of a court or that of a frenzied mob (Acts 6:8–7:60).

In its legislative role, the Sanhedrin could issue decrees and proclaim ordinances. In its political role, the Sanhedrin could approve a king’s appointment, sanction an offensive war, and perform other administrative matters. In its religious role, the Sanhedrin could appoint a high priest and was the final court of appeals for all religious matters. The Sanhedrin was responsible for determining the religious calendar that dictated many details of Levitical worship, a role that allowed the Jews of the Diaspora to worship in coordination with Jews in Jerusalem.

The Sanhedrin was the central authority of Jewish life. The wisdom of its members provided guidance and direction for Jews around the world for centuries. For Christians, however, the Sanhedrin was usually a vehicle of persecution and torment.


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