

Did Jesus Admit to the Sanhedrin that He Was God?

by Servetus the Evangelical

Christians generally have believed that the Jewish Sanhedrin (Council) accused Jesus of Nazareth of claiming to be God, and that is why it condemned him as a blasphemer worthy of death. But according to the New Testament (NT) gospels, this is an error.

During the latter part of Jesus' public ministry, the scribes and Pharisees constantly questioned him about his teachings. They wanted to "catch Him in some statement, so as to deliver Him up to the rule and the authority of the governor" (Luke 20.20).

Matthew reveals the Jews' motive for arresting Jesus and the seventy-one judges of the Sanhedrin interrogating him. He says Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea, "knew that because of envy they had delivered Him up" (Matthew 27.18).

All four NT gospels provide much detail about the Sanhedrin's interrogation of Jesus. These judges questioned him all night in an attempt to bring formal charges against him. They really wanted to find Jesus guilty of a capital crime in accordance with Roman law; but if not, then it would be religious blasphemy based on their Torah (Law in Scripture).

During the latter half of the 20th century, many scholars conducted extensive studies as to whether the Sanhedrin committed legal irregularities in a trial of Jesus and whether the accounts of it in the NT gospels are historically authentic. But it likely was not a trial; rather, a hearing. Thus, David Catchpole concludes, "the debate about illegalities should be regarded as a dead end," so that it cannot be proved that gospel details are wrong.

The Sanhedrin's interrogation of Jesus only produced conflicting witnesses, resulting in false and inconsistent testimony. These witnesses could only bring the false charge that Jesus had threatened to destroy Jerusalem's temple (Matthew 26.59-61; Mark 14.55-59).

Sometimes when Jesus had preached to crowds, they questioned who he was, mostly if he was Israel's promised Messiah (John 6.14-15; 7.40-41; 8.25; 10.24). Consequently, Caiaphas the High Priest now demanded an unequivocal answer from Jesus about his identity. According to Matthew, Caiaphas exclaimed, "I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God" (Matthew 26.63).

Jesus answered Caiaphas somewhat obscurely, yet affirmatively, "You have said it yourself" (Matthew 26.64). Then he added, "nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN" (v. 64). This addition is a clear self-designation as the "Son of Man" in Daniel 7.13-14 and "Lord" in Psalm 110.1, the latter of whom Jews interpreted as the Messiah.

For the first time, Jesus unequivocally claimed publicly of being the Messiah-the Son of God-the Son of Man. It is the most thoroughgoing self-identification he ever made. He fully revealed who he was, yet he did not say that he was God. Rather, he distinguished himself from God and asserted that in the future God would vindicate him to the utmost.

The High Priest then invoked a long-held tradition, tearing his robe as a symbolic gesture signifying mourning, and charged Jesus with blasphemy. The Sanhedrin agreed.

The reason so many Christians have thought that Jesus here claimed to be God is that he admitted to being the Son of God. But that is a misunderstanding of the Bible's use of this expression. The Old Testament (OT) applies it not only to the promised Messiah, but also angels, pious men, kings of Israel, and even the nation of Israel. Jews rightly understood that the Messiah being the Son of God, as in Psalm 2.7, 12, indicated no more

than an unprecedented, intimate relationship between him and God. And the High Priest probably connected these two expressions, since Jews understood them synonymously.

Church fathers subsequently taught that Jesus was God because he was the Son of God. But they tended to be anti-Semitic, thus ignoring whatever Jews thought. And many church fathers were influenced by Greek religio-philosophy. Greek mythology espoused many gods and sons of gods, some of which were believed to have been generated by copulating with humans. Church fathers erroneously applied this Greek metaphysics. They reasoned that God having an only Son was similar to a man having a son. Since a man's son became a man like himself, they reasoned that God's Son must also be God.

It is most significant that neither the witnesses nor Sanhedrin members accused Jesus of ever claiming to be God. Jews had so accused Jesus twice in his career; yet both times he denied their accusation (John 5.16-47; 10.30-38). Apparently, they accepted his denial.

John A.T. Robinson rightly maintains that if Jesus had ever claimed to be God, "it is inconceivable, ... that it should not come out in the charges against him at the trial, where again the worst that can be said about him is that he claimed to be 'God's son.'"

Since Sanhedrin members did not think Jesus uttered a blasphemy by admitting to being the Son of God, it is rather perplexing to try to understand why they so charged him. The two blasphemy laws in the OT are about cursing God or otherwise acting defiantly against him (Leviticus 24.15-16; Numbers 15.30-31).

Bruce Corley informs that Judaism interpreted these two Torah laws of blasphemy with a "wider significance in the NT period ... Blasphemy referred to acts or words which violate God's power and majesty, a claiming of prerogatives which belong to God alone."

Furthermore, Jews never perceived that messianic imposters, of whom there were many, were blasphemers. Judaism only accused such pretenders of being heretics, which is a lesser offense. N.T. Wright explains that "confessing to being Messiah was not blasphemous" because it was "not in itself an affront to YHWH," namely, Yahweh.

Jesus' claim to being the "Son of Man" of Daniel 7.13-14 and "Lord" of Psalm 110.1 implied a far greater authority than these judges possessed. And due to envy they had personalized their conflict with him. So, it seems they concluded that Jesus was acting defiantly against themselves—the divinely approved council—and therefore against God.