

THE SANHEDRIN

[SAN hee drun] (*a council or assembly*) - the **highest ruling body and court of justice** among the Jewish people in the time of Jesus. Headed by the high priest of Israel, the Sanhedrin was granted limited authority over certain religious, civil, and criminal matters by the foreign nations that dominated the land of Israel at various times in its history. The Sanhedrin was exercising this limited power when it charged Jesus with the crime of blasphemy but then sent him to Pilate, the Roman official, for a formal trial and sentencing.

The word Sanhedrin is not found in the NKJV; instead the word council is used. Usually the assembly itself is meant, although the word may also refer to the assembly meeting ([John 11:47](#)) or to the place where the assembly met ([Luke 22:66](#); [Acts 4:15](#)). The same word is also used for smaller, local courts of justice ([Matt 10:17](#); [Mark 13:9](#)). The Sanhedrin is also implied in Bible passages that mention a meeting of the various groups which made up the council: the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes ([Mark 14:53-55](#)). Sometimes some of the members of the Sanhedrin are simply called rulers ([Luke 24:20](#); [Acts 4:5](#)).

The Sanhedrin had 71 members. The New Testament mentions some of them by name: Joseph of Arimathea ([Mark 15:43](#)), Gamaliel ([Acts 5:34](#)), Nicodemus ([John 3:1](#); [7:50](#)), the high priests Annas and Caiaphas ([Luke 3:2](#)) and Ananias ([Acts 23:2](#)). The high priest was always president of the Sanhedrin. ***Some scholars suggest that the apostle Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin before his conversion to Christianity, but this is not known for sure.***

The Sanhedrin grew out of the council of advisors for the high priest when the Jewish people lived under the domination of the Persian and Greek empires. In the beginning, the council was made up of the leading priests and the most distinguished aristocrats among the lay people. Later, however, as the influence of the scribes grew, they were also given some positions on the Sanhedrin. In this way, the Sanhedrin came to include both Sadducees-or "chief priests" and "elders"-and Pharisees or scribes. These were the two main groups within Judaism, and the Sanhedrin usually tried to maintain a balance of power between them. But [Acts 23:1-10](#) shows that the Sanhedrin would sometimes divide along party lines. As he stood before the Sanhedrin, the apostle Paul was shrewd enough to pit the Pharisees against the Sadducees to his own advantage.

After A.D. 6 the official authority of the Sanhedrin extended only to the province of Judea in southern Palestine. Still, Jews living elsewhere respected the Sanhedrin highly and would often be guided by its decisions. Within the province of Judea, which included the city of Jerusalem, the Romans left most of the business of governing the Jews to the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin even had its own police force, or Temple police, so it could make arrests on its own. This is the force that arrested Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane ([Mark 14:43](#); [Acts 4:1-3](#)).

The Sanhedrin also served as the supreme court of the Jews. This does not mean that people who were dissatisfied with the verdict of the lower court could appeal to the Sanhedrin for a different decision. But matters of special importance and other matters that lower courts were unable to resolve were brought to the Sanhedrin. ***The Roman rulers did, however, reserve the right to interfere with what the Sanhedrin was doing, as happened in the case of Paul*** ([Acts 23:10](#); [24:7](#)), but this probably happened very seldom. The Romans denied the power of capital punishment to the Sanhedrin. This is why the Jews said to Pilate after they had tried Jesus, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death" ([John 18:31](#)).

In the New Testament the Sanhedrin was involved in hearings against Jesus ([Matt 26:59](#); [Mark 14:55](#)), Peter and John and the other apostles ([Acts 4:1-23](#); [5:17-41](#)), Stephen ([Acts 6-7](#)), and Paul ([Acts 22-24](#)). Jesus probably was not officially tried by the Sanhedrin. It is more likely that He was given a preliminary hearing to establish the charges against Him and then taken to Pilate. It is also not clear whether Stephen was officially condemned and executed by the Sanhedrin or simply was stoned by an angry mob without due process of law ([Acts 7:54-60](#)).