

## Why a high priest broke Jewish law to indict Jesus

Immediately after Jesus's arrest, the high priest Caiaphas held a rushed and rigged hearing to decide the prophet's fate.



The night Jesus was arrested, he was taken to the high priest's house for a hearing that would lead to his crucifixion by the Romans.

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Custom dictated that after the Temple guards arrested Jesus, he should have been locked up in the [Temple](#) stockade until such time that the full Sanhedrin, or priestly council, could hear his case. This is exactly what happened to Peter, John, and other Apostles upon their arrest (Acts 4:3; 5:17). But instead, Jesus was taken directly to the Jerusalem residence of the high priest Joseph Caiaphas.

This was highly unusual, for a number of reasons. First, it was the eve of Passover, one of the holiest nights on the Jewish liturgical calendar, when the high priest and other priestly officials would be expected to celebrate the festival with their families, rather than adjudicating the case of a rural rabbi from Galilee. Second, while Caiaphas's residence was probably quite comfortable, if not luxurious, it was unlikely that his home would have been large enough to accommodate the full quorum of 72 members on the Sanhedrin, even assuming that these members would have allowed themselves to be summoned on such short notice.

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To make matters worse, the indictment hearing as described by Mark did not go according to plan. The various eyewitnesses did not agree. "We heard him say," said one, "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands" (Mark 14:58). Inflammatory rhetoric, perhaps, but hardly grounds for prosecution, because countless prophets in Hebrew Scripture had said the same thing, warning that the Jerusalem Temple would face imminent destruction.

Caiaphas then tried a different tack and asked Jesus flat out, "Are you the Messiah?" According to Mark, Jesus replied, "I am," and then cited from the Book of Daniel and the Psalms: "You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of 'the Power,' and 'coming with the clouds of heaven'" (Psalms 110:1; Daniel 7:13-14).

This is what Caiaphas needed to hear. He knew that the Romans had no interest in the minutiae of Jewish exegesis, but words like "the right hand of the power" would get their attention. The high priest tore his clothes and said, "Why do we still need witnesses?" In his view, Jesus had incriminated himself.

## **The Caiaphas Indictment**

Why did the Caiaphas order an immediate hearing on Jesus' fate at his own residence? One answer is that Caiaphas wanted to preempt any more violent demonstrations like Jesus' attack on the money changers, which would undoubtedly have provoked Roman forces.

Another motive might be that Caiaphas expected the Pharisee faction of the Sanhedrin to come to Jesus' defense. The Gospels attest that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, both members of the Sanhedrin, were in sympathy with Jesus' teachings (Mark 15:43; John 19:38). Caiaphas's fear was not unfounded; some months later, when Peter and the Apostles were brought before the Sanhedrin, the noted Pharisee Gamaliel defended them and ultimately secured their release (Acts 5:34-39).

Indeed, it is unlikely that Jesus' indictment by Caiaphas involved "the full council" as Mark suggests. The Mishnah states that no trial by the Sanhedrin could take place at night, or during a festival. Even *if* Caiaphas had been able to convene the full Sanhedrin, including scribes, in his hours, they may not have fit in his home. Formal meetings of the Sanhedrin usually took place in a hall known as the *Lishkat La-Gazit* ("Chamber of Hewn Stones"), located in the Stoa of the Temple. Indeed, in John's Gospel, the chief priests or members of the Sanhedrin are not present at all.

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