

**A Consideration of the Gospel Accounts
of the Jewish Charge of Blasphemy Against Jesus**

Steven L. Cox
Associate Professor of New Testament and Greek
Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary
2216 Germantown Road, South
Germantown, TN 38088

Christianity has viewed the charge of blasphemy against Jesus Christ by the Jewish authorities as a result of their bias against him, which subsequently led to their bias and persecution of Christians. Students of the Bible recognize some of the doctrinal differences between Jesus and the Jewish sects (i.e., the doctrine of the resurrection—the Sadducees and Essenes; oral tradition interpreted as binding as the Mosaic law—the Pharisees); however, Jesus was a Jew who grew up in a Jewish home in Galilee. Jesus' theology generally coincided with the Pharisaic doctrine based on Scripture; however, Jesus' application of Scripture was different from the Pharisees on many occasions, including grace and the interpretation and application of the law.

A Definition of Blasphemy

Jerry M. Henry held that “the biblical context, blasphemy is an attitude of disrespect that finds expression in an act directed against the character of God.”¹ Furthermore, blasphemy is an act that “denies and makes sport of the overwhelming concept of all the Old Testament history

¹Trent C. Butler, ed., *The Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), s.v. “Blasphemey,” by Jerry M. Henry.

and law, namely the sovereignty of the Creator. More than any other act of man it eradicates the fundamental creator-creature distinction upon which all the cosmic law orders are based.”²

Five Hebrew words are translated into English as “blasphemy,” with בְּרָחָה, used only in the piel, and commonly defined as “revile,” “hurl insults,” or “blaspheme.” The second most common Hebrew word translated as blaspheme is יָסָא, which conveys the idea “to despise” or “to show disrespect toward.” The three lesser used Hebrew words are: תָּרַח, which conveys “taunt” or “reproach;” לָלַךְ, defined as “despise;” and בָּרַח, which is a word translated as “bless,” but is used euphemistically as “cursing,” which would constitute “blasphemy” (1 Kgs. 21:10, 13; Job 1:5, 11).

Ancient secular Greek used βλασφημία to convey “scurrility”—abusive speech, misuse of words,³ or a strong form of personal “mockery and calumny.”⁴ Obviously, these definitions were not connected to the Judeo-Christian concept of actions or thoughts about or against God; however, these secular ideas of βλασφημία do coincide with those expressed in both the Old and New Testaments. Exodus 22:28a explicitly states: “Do not blaspheme God.”

Biblical descriptions of blasphemy are much broader than those described above. Jewish sources indicate that blasphemy represents speech or action that shows disrespect toward God.⁵

²Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), s.v. “Blasphemy,” by William White.

³Demosthenes, *Against Aristogeiton* in the *Loeb Classical Library*, translated by Norman W. DeWitt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986; London: William Heinemann, 1986), 25.26.

⁴Isocrates, *Helen* in *LCL*, translated by Larve van Hook (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986; London: William Heinemann, 1986), 10.45.

⁵See Darrell Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism: The Charge Against Jesus in Mk. 14:53-65* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 30-112. Within the second chapter of this work, Bock catalogued examples of acts and words that constitute blasphemy according to a variety of Jewish sources. Note the following examples: (1.) pronouncing or use of the Divine Name, *m* Sanhedrin 7:5; Targum Jonathan on 1 Kgs. 21:10, 13; (2.) the one who curses by the name of the Kosem—“the name of God,” *m* Sanhedrin 9:6; (3.) profaning the Divine Name, *m* Pirke Aboth 4.4b; *b* Sanhedrin 55b-57a; (4.) mocking God, *t* Sotah 3:18; (5.) adding to Scripture, *t* Megillah 3:41; (6.) violating the Sabbath, the Targums, Numbers 15:30-31; (7.) mocking the Torah, Tannatic Midrashim, Sifre 112 on

One understanding of blasphemy was the dishonoring and reviling of God's name, being, or a work done by one's word or action. According to S. J. De Vries,

This can occur through a deliberate and flagrant sin (Num. 15:30) and through speaking insultingly against (Isa. 37:6) or cursing (Lev. 24:11, 16; I. Samuel 3:13 LXX-RSV); Rev. 16:9, 11, 21) God (cf, 1 Sam. 2:17; Neh. 9:18; Tob. 1:18 [LXX S]; II. Macc. 10:34; 12:14; Acts 19:37).⁶

Blasphemy, therefore, could also include the improper use of God's name: "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name," (Ex. 20:7) or the pronunciation of God's name in an attitude of disrespect. William White confirmed, "The name of God in the OT was the personal revelation of His character and so to defame or defile the sacred name, the tetragrammation (J/Y H W H=Jehovah), was to reject the mercy and power of God."⁷ The crux of blasphemy is that it denies the doctrine of the sovereignty of God and abolishes the creator-creature distinctive, which are central doctrines in Old Testament theology.

Judaism developed procedures to protect witnesses from having to utter a blasphemy when testifying against one guilty of this sin. According to the *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*,

When the testimony was first given, the phrase was repeated with a substitute for the four-lettered Name. At the end of the trial, however, the public were [sic] excluded, and the principle witnesses gave the exact words of the blasphemy, at which the judges arose and rent their garments. The other witnesses did not have to repeat the exact testimony, but could say, "I heard the same."⁸

Numbers 15:30-31; (8.) unfaithfulness to God, Tannaitic Midrashim, Sifre 112 on Numbers 15:30-31; (9.) corporate blasphemy (idolatry)—the worship of the golden calf, Amoraic Midrashim, Exodus Rabbah 41:1; y Sh^cbuoth 3.34b (Neusner 3.1); (10.) arrogance toward God, Aramaic Midrashim, Canticles Rabbah 2.13 § 4; 2.16 § 1; 3.4 § 2; 4.4 § 5; (11.) complimenting an arbitrator or an opponent in order to gain advantage, y Sanhedrin 1.18b (Neusner 1.1); (12.) profaning the Sabbath, y Sanhedrin 5.22.d (Neusner 5.1); and (13.) speaking against Israel, b Sanhedrin 94a-b.

⁶George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), s.v. "Blasphemy," by S. J. De Vries.

⁷S.v. "Blasphemy," by White.

⁸Isaac Landman, ed., *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1969), s.v. "Blasphemy."

The community stoned those guilty of blasphemy (Lev. 24:10-23 and 1 Kgs. 21:10). Bock noted, “Just as the blasphemer (מקלל) in questioned is executed by stoning, so all who are stoned [must be subsequently hanged].”⁹

The Gospels Accounts of Jewish Charges of Blasphemy Against Jesus

The Canonical Gospels record instances where Jesus Christ was charged as a blasphemer, who was accused of usurping God’s authority (Matt. 9:3; Mk. 2:7; Lk. 5:21), claiming to be the Messiah, the Son of God (Matt. 26:65; Mk. 14:64), or making himself God (Jn. 10:33, 36). Graham H. Twelftree assessed, “All the Gospels agree that Jesus claimed or admitted equality with God—or claimed to be the Son of God—and that this was considered by the Jews to be blasphemous and worthy of the death penalty (Matt. 26:63-66; Mk. 14:61-65; Lk. 22:66-71; Jn. 10:31-39; 19:7).”¹⁰

The Healing of the Paralyzed Man (Mk. 2:1-12; Matt. 9:1-9; Lk. 5:17-26)

Each of the Synoptic accounts of Jesus healing the paralyzed man includes Jesus’ statement, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”¹¹ The use of the passive voice ἀφίενται in Mark. 2:5 is commonly interpreted as a way of speaking of divine activity: “God forgives your sins.” Twelftree held, “This passive expression would probably have been understood as an attempt to

⁹Bock, 99. See the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 45b-46b. See also Numbers 16:30.

¹⁰Joel B. Green, Scott McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL and Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1992), s.v. “Blasphemy,” by Graham H. Twelftree.

¹¹This writer chose to focus on the Markan account of the healing of the paralyzed man, with occasional references to the Matthean and Lukan accounts.

avoid pronouncing God's name."¹² The ambiguity of the statement "your sins are forgiven," which is consistent with Jesus' self-disclosure, is clarified by Matthew 9:2, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." From this Synoptic account it is obvious Jesus was merely providing assurance to the man.

Based on the context of Mark 2:1-12, Robert G. Bratcher identified blasphemy in v. 7 as referring to "words which are insulting to God: 'This man is insulting (or, dishonoring) God.'"¹³ Nowhere in Jesus' statement was there a declaration of his personal power over sin nor was he arrogating to himself the sole right to forgive sin. Jesus' statement revealed that he was "the one who stands in God's stead or as God's representative."¹⁴

Within the context of these synoptic accounts, there is no direct insult to God, for in 2 Samuel 12:13 Nathan announced the forgiveness of David's sins: "Then David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the LORD.' Nathan replied, 'The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die.'" William Lane confirmed that the scribes "object[ed] to Jesus' conviction that he can speak for God."¹⁵

The scribes' understanding of Jesus' statement in Mark 2:5 is equated with the claim of acting in the name of and authority of God, violating God's divine prerogative. James Brooks assessed, "The scribes were certainly correct that the Scriptures everywhere teach that 'God

¹²S.v., "Blasphemy," by Twelftree.

¹³Robert G. Bratcher, *A Translator's Guide to the Gospel of Mark* (London, New York, Stuttgart: United Bibles Societies, 1981), 22.

¹⁴Hugh Anderson, *Mark*, in *New Century Bible Commentary*, ed. Matthew Black (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 100.

¹⁵William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mk*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 95-96.

alone,' or better 'One, even God' or 'the one God,' can forgive sins."¹⁶ Nowhere in the Scriptures did Jesus deny this point. If the scribes did not accept Jesus as Messiah, they had to condemn him. If Jesus was not divine, the scribes would have been correct in their assessment that he was a blasphemer, for "he must be 'either God, or mad, or bad.'"¹⁷

From the Gospels, one may see that which elicits the accusation of blasphemy against Jesus is the blindness of the Jewish scribes. Anderson concluded this blindness "prohibits them [the scribes] from seeing that the signs of the kingdom of God are present in, with, and around Jesus, and therefore a new and unprecedented authority accrues to him."¹⁸ What the scribes failed to recognize "was that the reign of God had drawn near in Jesus and that he had authority to act on God's behalf."¹⁹

As stated above, Leviticus 24:11-16 defines the penalty for blasphemy is death by stoning. The evidence of guilt had to be incontrovertible; however, based on the difficulty of Jesus' passive statement, "Son, your sins are forgiven," the charge of the scribes in Mark 2:7 was inconclusive.

Just as Jesus pronounced the forgiveness of the paralytic man's sins in v. 7, he claimed authority as Son of Man to forgive the sins of the scribes: "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." Mark's use of "Son of Man" refers to the destiny of Jesus to suffer, die, and rise from the dead with the penalty of sin paid in full.²⁰ Who else

¹⁶James A. Brooks, *Mark in The New American Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery, vol. 23 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1991), 59.

¹⁷R. A. Cole, *The Gospel According to Mark: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 120.

¹⁸Anderson, 101.

¹⁹Brooks, 59.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 60.

could make such a claim of forgiveness but God incarnate? The context of Mark 2:1-12 does not mention a response of the Jewish authorities to Jesus' statement in 2:10 or the healing in 2:11.

Lane correctly assessed, "The significance of the suspicion of blasphemy so early in the Galilean ministry is that it becomes [became] the basis of a formal accusation and condemnation before the Sanhedrin at the close of the ministry" (see Mk. 14:60-64 below).²¹ It was at this point in which the "religious authorities" began to plot Jesus' death.

The Jewish Charge of Blasphemy and Attempted Stoning of Jesus (Jn. 10:30-38)

Jesus' statements in John 10:30, "I and my Father are one," along with John 1:1-18 confirm that Jesus was/is God rather than a mere human.²² F. F. Bruce recognized, "So responsive is the Son to the Father that he is one in mind, one in purpose, one in action with him."²³ The Jews found these words in John 10:30 more provocative than any of his works, with the possible exception of the raising of Lazarus. Although the Jews would agree that a person could regulate his words and actions to the will of God, they did, however, regard these words as blasphemy.

Jesus' works were good and at the Father's direction, for they were acts of obedience to the Father and acts of blessing to man. According to Bruce, "His [Jesus'] works bore witness to

²¹Lane, 95.

²²Note that the pronominal adjective *ἐν* is nominative singular neuter. According to A. T. Robertson, *ἐν* is not "one person (cf. *heis* in Gal. 3:28), but one essence or nature. By the plural *sumus* (separate persons) Sabellius is refuted, by *unum* Arius. So Bengel rightly argues, though Jesus is not referring, of course, to either Sabellius or Arius. The Pharisees had accused Jesus of making himself equal with God as his own special Father (Jn. 5:18). Jesus then admitted and proved this claim (5:19-30). Now he states it tersely in this great saying repeated later (17:11, 21). Note *hen* used in I Cor. 3:3 of the oneness in work of the planter and the waterer and in 17:11, 23 of the hoped for unity of Christ's disciples. This crisp statement is the climax of Christ's claims concerning the relation between the Father and himself (the Son). They stir the Pharisees to uncontrollable anger." See A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures of the Greek New Testament*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1932), 186.

²³F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 233.

his divine mission (Jn. 5:36); his words were in perfect harmony with his works.”²⁴ The Jews regarded Jesus’ words as blasphemy; therefore, they proceeded to stone him as prescribed in Leviticus 24:16. John’s use of *πάλι* refers back to the Jewish authorities attempt to stone Jesus in 8:59.

According to Gerald Borchert, “Jesus’ defense has been consistently to tell the Jews to examine his great (i.e., good) works (10:32; cf. 5:30).”²⁵ Jesus’ response to the Jewish authorities was that he had shown many good works. He questioned them as to which of the works were they going to stone him. Their reply was, “‘We are not stoning you for any of these [works],’ . . . ‘but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God’” (10:33). Leon Morris observed “‘If there is a sense in which the term ‘gods’ may be legitimately applied to men, then much more may Jesus assert his unity with his Father.”²⁶ Borchert confirmed, “The Jewish concern was primarily with his words (10:37, cf. 6:42, 60; 7:29-30) though his works on the Sabbath also troubled them (cf. 5:16).”²⁷ Morris concluded, “This shows that they had discerned accurately enough what his teaching meant. What they did not consider was whether it was true.”²⁸

Jesus’ use of “law” in v. 34 (“Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are gods?’”) was not a specific reference to the Pentateuch, but a broader reference to the Old Testament as a whole. According to Morris, “Jesus points out in Psalm 82:6 it stands written ‘you are gods.’ . . . The passage refers to the judges of Israel, and the expression ‘gods’ is applied to them in the

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11* in *The New American Commentary*, vol. 25A, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 342.

²⁶Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Jn.* in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 466.

²⁷Borchert, 342.

²⁸Morris, 467.

exercise of their high and God-given office.”²⁹ Bruce confirmed, “His [Jesus’] charge against them is that they administer justice unjustly, showing favor to the wicked instead of upholding the right of the helpless and oppressed; the sentence he passed on them is death.”³⁰

Jesus stated in v. 35, “and the Scripture cannot be broken,” which is referring to a specific verse and not the Old Testament books as a whole. According to Morris, “What was true of this passage could be true only because it was part of inspired Scriptures and showed the characteristics of the whole.”³¹ The Jews acknowledged the authority of the Hebrew Bible; therefore, they should accept the implications of what it said (see Mk. 7:11).

Jesus’ emphasis concerning Scriptural integrity and authority pointed to the fact that those referred to as “gods,” in Psalm 86:2, were men. These “gods” were men, who received “the word of God,” who were required to hear and obey that word, in connection with their calling as judges. In light of Psalm 82:6, Jesus asked, “What about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, ‘I am God’s Son?’” (Jn.10:36). According to Borchert, Jesus “was the God-sent one, and if Scripture could apply such theological terms to created beings, how much more should terms be applied to the unique Son of God.”³²

Jesus never denied his special relation with the Father. He did, however, deny the Jewish authorities’ understanding of his identity. Morris correctly assessed, “They thought he was making himself God. He held that he was not making himself God . . . [or] anything. He was

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Bruce, 234.

³¹Morris, 468.

³²Borchert, 343.

what he was, and it was the Father who in the first instance sent him into the world, and in the second instance testified of him (5:37).”³³

Jesus challenged the Jewish authorities to let his works be the criterion of his identity. No human could do the works that Jesus performed. Since Jesus’ works were the works of God, then his works were a witness to his divinity. Morris concluded, “The knowledge to which a right perception of the works would bring them (the Jewish authorities) is that of the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son.”³⁴ Just as the Jewish authorities failed to recognize the great work of Jesus healing the blind man, surely they were not about to accept his words.³⁵

The Jews again attempted to arrest Jesus as they had sought to do at the feast of Tabernacles (7:30), but they failed. Jesus’ hour had not yet come.

Jesus’ Trial Before the Sanhedrin (Mk. 14:53-65)

This passage marks the beginning of the final events leading to the crucifixion of Jesus, for the Jewish authorities here accused Jesus of blasphemy and thus condemned him to death, which led to his subsequent crucifixion. Ezra Gould’s observation (“This meeting of the Sanhedrin must have been arranged in expectation of Jesus’ arrest”) is based on the context of Mark 14:53: “They took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, elders and teachers of the law came together.”³⁶ Although Mk. does not identify the high priest by name, Matthew 26:57 identifies him as Caiaphas.

³³Morris, 469.

³⁴Ibid., 470.

³⁵Borchert, 344.

³⁶Ezra P. Gould, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark in The International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983), 277.

According to James Brooks, “The statement ‘were looking for evidence’ (v. 55) supports the view that Mark was describing an informal hearing, but the expression ‘the whole Sanhedrin’ points toward a formal trial.”³⁷ Robert Bratcher defined “evidence” in v. 55 as “somebody whose testimony would authorize them [the Sanhedrin] to condemn Jesus to death.”³⁸ Furthermore, the statement ‘the whole Sanhedrin’ led Brooks to conclude: “Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, if present, would not have voted to condemn and then the next day identified themselves with Jesus by burying him. Of course they may not have been ‘invited’ [to the meeting].”³⁹

The Old Testament confirmed two or more witnesses had to agree in testimony against a person who had been charged with a capital crime. The penalty for blasphemy was death (Lev. 24:16; Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:6; 19:15), yet Mark 14:56 states “Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree.” Hugh Anderson held, “Normally there was a bias in favor of the accused, and witnesses were heard and evidence prepared in advance of the trial.”⁴⁰ The apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus suggested there were witnesses who testified in behalf of Jesus, “And they durst not any more lay hands upon them that had spoken in the behalf of Jesus before Pilate.”⁴¹

One must remember while Israel was under Roman occupation, the Sanhedrin did not have legal power to execute a criminal. Although the Jewish authorities sought to arrest and

³⁷Brooks, 242.

³⁸Bratcher, 200.

³⁹Brooks, 244.

⁴⁰Anderson, 329.

⁴¹The Gospel of Nicodemus, “The Acts of Pilate,” part 1, 12.2. See Montague Rhodes James, ed., *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 106.

execute Jesus earlier in Mark (3:6), the Jewish authorities had to formulate a charge against him that would convince the Romans to execute him.

John 2:19 includes Jesus' words, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days," whereas Mark omits this statement. It is natural to assume that those who heard this statement interpreted it as a threat against the temple. According to Lane, "Throughout the Greco-Roman world the destruction or desecration of places of worship was regarded as a capital offense."⁴² Jesus never claimed that he would destroy the Jewish temple and in three days restore it, "but he did intimate that the new temple of his resurrection body would be raised in three days."⁴³

R. A. Cole reasoned, "It is obvious that none of the early charges against Jesus about Sabbath-breaking would hold water, or they would have been produced at once."⁴⁴ The Palestinian Talmud confirmed that profaning the Sabbath was a capital offense (see note 5 above), which resulted in the stoning of those who were guilty of this act.⁴⁵ Likewise, it is obvious that the testimony concerning the temple alone (Jn. 2:19) did not provide the basis of the final verdict. Lane noted, "[Jesus'] utterance about destroying the temple and rebuilding it was

⁴²Lane, 534. *Berakhot* 9:14A, in the *Jerusalem Talmud*, suggested annihilation for those who repented of their activity in the destruction of the Temple: "Even those [soldiers] who stretched forth their hands [to destroy] the Sanctuary have hope. . . . They cannot be brought near [to enter paradise] because they have already stretched forth their hands [to destroy] the Sanctuary. They cannot be driven away [to damnation] because they repented. [They are not judged and cannot be condemned.] Concerning such persons it is said, '[They shall] sleep a perpetual sleep and not wake, says the Lord [Jer. 51:39]. [They remain in a state of limbo forever.]'" Likewise, *Berakhot* 9:14B suggested that those soldiers "[who did not directly stretch forth their hands to destroy the Temple], these will not live [in eternal paradise] but will not be judged [for eternal damnation]. Concerning these persons the verse says, '[They shall] sleep a perpetual sleep.'" See *Berakhot* in *The Talmud of the Land of Israel* [Jerusalem Talmud] vol. 1, trans. Tzvee Zahavy (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 318.

⁴³Brooks, 242.

⁴⁴Cole, 304.

⁴⁵The Gospel of Nicodemus, Part 1—The Acts of Pilate 1.1 stated that one of the charges against Jesus was that "he doth pollute the Sabbaths." See James, 96.

messianic in tone. . . . Perhaps for that reason Caiaphas asked Jesus pointedly if he claimed to be the Messiah.”⁴⁶

Some scholars maintained that a person who claimed to be the Messiah was not guilty of committing a capital crime.⁴⁷ Approximately a century after Jesus’ trial, Simon bar Kosiba claimed to be the Messiah and led the Jews into a second war with the Romans (132-135 A.D.) He was so convincing in his claim that the famed Rabbi Akiba accepted his claim, yet no charge of blasphemy against bar Kosiba is recorded. Others argued that the claim to be Messiah was an act of blasphemy, for the Messiah would be revealed by the Father and accompanied by great signs and wonders. Such signs would include military power, since Jewish hope centered on messianic deliverance from foreign dominance and oppression.⁴⁸

Caiaphas failed to find evidence from the witnesses that would convict Jesus; therefore, he himself questioned Jesus as if there was a basis for deeper interrogation. Jesus was innocent of the fictitious charges and his silence indicated his innocence: “If there is no crime, there is no defense.” Cole confirmed, “Matthew 26:63 makes clear that this was a casual enquiry by the high priest, but a question put ‘under oath,’ as it were, in the solemn name of God.”⁴⁹

Caiaphas’ question, “Are you the Son of God?” could be interpreted simply “Are you the Son of David?” According to some Old Testament passages, Israel’s kings were sometimes referred to as “sons of God” (cf., 2 Sam. 7:14; Pss. 2:7; 89:26-27), yet these passages are interpreted as messianic. The Messiah was viewed as a king in the line of David. Lane

⁴⁶Lane, 535.

⁴⁷Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, in *The Anchor Bible Reference Library*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 534-544.

⁴⁸See J. C. O’Neal, *Who Did Jesus Think He Was?* in *Biblical Interpretation Series*, 11 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 42-54.

⁴⁹Cole, 306.

concluded, “The question of the high priest cannot have referred to Jesus’ deity, but was limited to a single issue: do you claim to be the Messiah?”⁵⁰

Jesus’ answer to Caiaphas’ question was Ἐγώ εἰμι, the emphatic “I am,” which appears to be an allusion to the divine name in Exodus 3:14. Jesus followed up this curt answer by saying, “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Lane maintained, “The utterance of verse 62b brings together Ps. 110:1 and Dan. 7:13 (cf., Is. 52:8), in a formulation describing the enthronement and *parousia* of the Son of Man, while the context leaves no doubt that Son of Man is a self-designation.”⁵¹ Gould interpreted 14:62b, “In connection with Jesus’ confession of the Messianic claim, . . . [the Sanhedrin] would see him exercising his Messianic power.”⁵² Gould’s statement concerning the recipient of this prophecy is based on the second plural verb ὄψεσθε – “you [plural] will see.” This phrase is commonly interpreted, “That his opponents would realize that he was the Son of Man in the apocalyptic sense, that he was God’s Son and would sit by his side, and that he would return for judgment.”⁵³ Darrell Bock concluded, “This left the audience with a choice: either Jesus had uttered words of outrageous blasphemy or he was who he claimed to be, the very revelator of God who is in equal union with God. Neutrality no longer was possible.”⁵⁴

Caiaphas tore his garment in response to Jesus’ answer, thus expressing indignation at his perceived blasphemy. As a result, the Sanhedrin condemned Jesus as worthy of death (v. 64).

⁵⁰Lane, 535.

⁵¹Ibid., 537.

⁵²Gould, 279.

⁵³Brooks, 243.

⁵⁴Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 469.

Brooks concluded that Jesus, “claiming to be the Son of God, . . . claiming to be the Son of Man, . . . claiming to sit at God’s right hand, predicting a return from heaven, and using the divine name ‘I am’ could and probably would have been considered blasphemy.”⁵⁵ According to Bock,

Some Jews seem willing to consider the possibility of being seated next to God for a select few great figures and under very limited conditions. Except for perhaps the Enoch-Son of Man portrait, none of these images appears to portray a figure seated at God’s right hand. . . . To sit at God’s right hand on the same throne, as opposed to sitting on a separate throne next to God or somewhere else in heaven, is a higher form of exaltation than merely sitting in heaven.⁵⁶

The Legal Basis of the Charge of Blasphemy and the Judicial Procedures of the Sanhedrin Against Jesus

Early in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus is under the scrutiny of the Jewish authorities and their plot to kill him. Regardless of his deeds, in most instances it appears that it is Jesus’ words rather than his deeds that brought on the Jewish authorities’ wrath.

The first recorded charge of blasphemy against Jesus came as a result of his absolution of the paralytic man’s sins. This was an unusual phenomenon, for neither the Old Testament nor the Mishnah directly prescribed death for a mere human who offered absolution of sin. These two sources only identify the use of “the divine name” as blasphemy, yet Isaiah 43:25 refers to the fact that it is God’s sole right to forgive sins and Isaiah 37:6 identifies this as blasphemy. (See *m* Sanhedrin 7:5.)

After a series of teachings, John 10:31-39 gives a second example of the Jewish authorities’ desire to stone Jesus, based on their charge he was guilty of blasphemy—“because you [Jesus] a mere man, claim to be God” (Jn. 10:33). This verse reflects back to John 10:30, “I and my Father are one.” According to Leon Morris,

⁵⁵Brooks, 244.

⁵⁶Bock, 235.

It is sometimes said that this charge can scarcely be historical since according to the Mishnah it was necessary to pronounce the sacred name for anyone to be guilty of blasphemy (*Sanh.* 7:5), and there is no evidence that Jesus did this. But this ignores the fact that (a.) the Mishnah represented Pharisaic Judaism and does not give the views of the Sadducees who were important in this connection; (b) Jesus' enemies were anxious to be rid of him and would not boggle at legal niceties; (c) in any case there was a broader interpretation of blasphemy, based on passages like Num. 15:30-31; Deut. 21:22. . . . They regard the present passage as coming under the broader heading based on Deut. 21:22.⁵⁷

Although the divine name was not invoked in either of these cases, it is certain that the above passages are under the broad understanding of blasphemy, which is reflected in *m Sanhedrin* 7.

The trial of Jesus, as presented in Mark 14:53-65, has many discrepancies with the legal proceedings of the Sanhedrin as described in the Mishnah (*Sanh.* 4-7). Brooks listed six contradictions of the legal proceedings described in Mark's account of the trial of Jesus compared to the general proceedings described in the Mishnah:

First, no trial could be held at night. Second, the verdict in a capital case could not be reached until the second day, and therefore trials could not be held on the eve of the Sabbath or a feast day. Third, witnesses had to be warned to relate only true, firsthand testimony. Fourth, those accused of blasphemy could be convicted only if they reviled the Divine Name. Fifth, trials could not be held in the palace of the high priest. Sixth, the Old Testament does not specify crucifixion as a punishment.⁵⁸

Mark 14:53-65 presents two statements that could result in the death penalty according to the Mishnah: "I will destroy this man-made temple and in three days I will build another" (Mk. 14:58) and "'I am, . . . And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven'" (Mk. 14:62). The combination of ἐγώ εἰμι with the combination of the Messianic texts (Ps. 110:1 and Dan. 9:13) resulted in Caiaphas' charge of blasphemy against Jesus. Lane rejected the idea that ἐγώ εἰμι is the theophanic "I am" based on the emphatic "are you the Christ" in v. 61. Yet, Jesus' emphatic response, if taken in a

⁵⁷Morris, 467.

⁵⁸Brooks, 240.

theophanic manner (cf., Ex. 3:14 in the LXX) would be the basis of Caiaphas' charge of blasphemy based on Leviticus 24:16 and Sanhedrin 7:5. Caiaphas' response of tearing his clothes (Mk. 14:63) would be in line with the practice stated in the Old Testament (Gen. 37:29, 34; 2 Kgs. 18:37; 19:1, 4; Jer. 41:5); the Apocrypha (Jdt. 14:19); and the Mishnah (Sanh. 7:5-6)⁵⁹

The Mishnah followed the Old Testament penalty for blasphemy—death.⁶⁰ Questions have been raised concerning the right of the Sanhedrin to execute the guilty in capital cases. During the time of Stephen's execution (Acts 7) it appears "either the procurator was absent from the city [Jerusalem], or he was willing to connive at what seemed to him an ordinary religious quarrel."⁶¹ Everett Ferguson held that the Roman authorities in Palestine did not intervene, for "Rome . . . gave considerable scope to local bodies to administer justice according to local laws, and in the case of violators of the temple, for instance, seems to have delegated execution to the local authorities."⁶² This point is logical, for when the procurator returned the Jews would be subject to Roman charges ranging from murder to insurrection, if they had violated provincial rule.

⁵⁹*m* Sanhedrin 7:5, ". . . the judges stand up on their feet and rend their garments, and they may not mend them again." See *Sanhedrin, The Mishnah*, translated by Herbert Danby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 392.

⁶⁰Compare Leviticus 24:16 and *m* Sanhedrin 7:5-6. See also *Tosefta*, Sanhedrin 8:5; *Babylonian Talmud*, Rosh ha-Shanah 17a; *Jerusalem Talmud*, Berachoth 9:13b.

⁶¹W. J. Conybeare, and J. S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 64. See Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2 ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 535.

⁶²Ferguson, 535. See also Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 2:218-221.

According to the Talmud, “Forty years before the destruction of the Temple, the right to judge capital cases was taken from the Israelite courts,”⁶³ including the Sanhedrin.⁶⁴ It was not unusual for Jewish authorities to usurp power when the reputation of the law and the temple was in question. Philo stated,

It is well that all who have a zeal for virtue should be permitted to exact the penalties offhand and with no delay, without bringing the offender before jury or council or any kind of magistrate at all, and give full scope of the feelings which possess them, that hatred of evil and love of God which urges them to inflict punishment without mercy on the impious. They should think that the occasion has made them councillors, jurymen, high sheriffs, members of assembly, accusers, witnesses, laws, people, everything in fact, so that without fear or hindrance they may champion religion in full security.⁶⁵

Philo did not confirm any retaliation by Roman officials on the Jews who persecuted “heretics.” According to F. F. Bruce, “Luke’s narrative [Acts] implies that the right of extradition continued to be enjoyed by the high priest under the provincial administration set up in A.D. 6.”⁶⁶

On the other hand, Josephus cited the execution of James, the half-brother of Christ, as an unlawful execution. As a result, a select group of Jews from Jerusalem “. . . secretly sent to King Agrippa urging him, for Ananus [the High Priest] had not been correct in his first step, to order him [James] to desist from any further such actions.”⁶⁷ Another group went to meet with Albinus (the Roman procurator of Judea from A.D. 62-64) and informed him about Ananus convening the Sanhedrin without his consent. (One must consider that this select group from

⁶³*The Talmud of the Land of Israel*, translated by Jacob Neusner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 31:12, 291. See *y. Sanh.* 18a, 24b; *b. Sanh.* 41a; *b. Abod. Zar.* 8b.

⁶⁴Conybeare and Howson, 57-58. See also Abraham Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1949), 302.

⁶⁵Philo, “The Special Laws,” *Philo, LCL*, trans. F. H. Colson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 7:131. See also Bock, 79 for discussion of Tannaitic Midrashim, Sifra § 112 on Numbers 15:30-31.

⁶⁶F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts in The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, revised, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1988), 181.

⁶⁷Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews, LCL*, trans. by Louis H. Feldman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 20:201. Compare this reference to Acts 4:1-21; 5:28-40.

Jerusalem had some clout based on their ability to gain the attention of Agrippa and Albinus.) Concerning the identity of this select group from Jerusalem, one must ask, “Was Josephus referring to the members of the Sanhedrin from the school of Hillel?” Albinus responded with a written threat to take vengeance on Ananus, because “. . . the high priest did not have the power to impose the death penalty during the period of the procurators.”⁶⁸

Whether or not the Sanhedrin had the legal power to execute people who were convicted of capital offenses, it is obvious that executions sanctioned by the Sanhedrin did occur.

Conclusion

Darrel Bock surveyed thirteen works, in the first chapter of *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism*, that centered on the question, “What was the nature of the blasphemy portrayed in Mark 14:53-65?”⁶⁹ Bock demonstrated that blasphemy can be committed by “. . . a combination of word and deed without formal utterance of the divine Name.”⁷⁰ A majority of the scholars, surveyed in the first chapter of Bock’s work believed that Mark held a biased view against the Jewish authorities based on discrepancies between the Gospel and later sources such as the Mishnah. Such a view poses some problems. First, Mark is a part of God’s inspired Scriptures. If there is a false biased position, then the trustworthiness of all of Scripture comes into question. Furthermore, the Old Testament presents Judaism rejecting the prophets. Based on the logic of these scholars, how can Judaism be biased against Judaism? Second, Mark wrote under the direction of Simon Peter, who was a firsthand witness of many of the events penned in this Gospel. Mark wrote his Gospel some twenty to thirty years after the trial of Jesus; whereas, the

⁶⁸Ibid. See also Cecil Roth, ed., *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Encyclopedia Judaica, 1974), s.v. “Luceius Albinus,” by Lea Roth.

⁶⁹Bock, 5-29. Bock listed fifteen questions that must be asked concerning the Mk. 14:53-65 passage, though he limited the discussion on the above question. (See Bock, page 5.)

Mishnah was compiled over one hundred and fifty years after the trial of Jesus. The other canonical Gospels also pre-date the Mishnah by more than a century. Therefore, based on their chronological closeness to the events, the Gospels must take precedence over any other source, especially non-canonical sources. Third, though many scholars like to quote the Mishnah and charge that the Gospels are biased against Judaism, they fail to consider the Roman historians such as Suetonius and Tacitus. Although these first-second century historians were not Christians, they did express some understanding of elements of the life of Christ, as reflected in the Gospels.⁷¹ Fourth, one might question if the judicial procedures of the Sanhedrin as reflected in the Mishnah are the same as those that occurred in the early first century A.D.

With the theory of the Gospels being biased against the Jewish authorities aside, one must now consider the charge of blasphemy against Jesus from the perspective of the Jewish authorities. It is obvious that the Jews sought to kill Jesus early in his public ministry, but “His hour had not come.” Why were these authorities against Jesus? Based on Scripture, it appears that Jesus did not meet their perceptions of what Messiah would be like. Rather than coming from an influential family (one of a Pharisaic or Sadducean type),⁷² Jesus came from Nazareth, a place where no other prophet came from. Jesus raised the dead, healed the blind, and did a host of other miracles, but the Jewish authorities refused to believe because the Kingdom he was building is eternal, rather than temporal, in the manner of gaining Israel independence from the grip and oppression of Rome. (See footnote 48 above.)

⁷⁰Ibid., 84.

⁷¹Suetonius, *The Deified Claudius*, in *LCL*, trans. J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1979), 25.4 and Tacitus, *The Annals of Tacitus* in *LCL*, trans. John Jackson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 15.44.

⁷²He was of Davidic lineage.

Since the Jews did not view Jesus as the Messiah, then he had to be considered in one of three other ways. He had to be treated as mentally disturbed, possessed by an “evil spirit” (Mk. 3:30-35), or as a charlatan who was leading Israel astray. Based on Scripture and the Mishnah, there is no evidence that the Jewish authorities considered Jesus as mentally ill. Although questions were raised concerning Jesus having an “evil spirit” (Matt. 12:24; Mk. 3:22, 30; Lk. 11:15-19), there is no evidence that the Jewish authorities sought to kill him on the basis he had an “evil spirit.” The Jewish authorities, therefore, opted to charge Jesus with blasphemy, for they perceived him as leading Israel away from their perception of God and as a troublemaker, which was a threat to their religious system and position of authority. If the Jewish authorities were not going to accept Jesus as Messiah, they had no other choice but to charge him with blasphemy. The irony of this charge of blasphemy against Jesus is that these Jews blasphemed on the basis of their slander and mockery of Jesus (Mk. 14:64-65).