

THE SANHEDRIN RETURNS FOR THE LAST DAYS

When Moses appointed the seventy elders to help share his workload in the wilderness¹ he probably had no idea that he was starting an institution that would still be in existence thousands of years later. Yet that is arguably when the Sanhedrin began, and it continued until the year AD 453, when it met for the last time in the town of Tiberias, on the shores of Galilee. This group of highly influential scholars has an almost continual line back to the great lawgiver himself, bar only the years of exile in Babylon. When Ezra returned with the second wave of pilgrims he reinstated these men who later became known as the *Sanhedrin* by the time of Christ.

Jewish rulers

The name *Sanhedrin* is derived from a Greek word, SYNEDRION, which implies 'sitting together.' This is exactly what the Sanhedrin did,

positioning themselves in a semi-circle, rather like the Roman senate, to discuss different matters of Jewish law. There were three main bodies to the Sanhedrin: first, there was *The Greater Sanhedrin* which was made up of seventy one members (the Seventy plus the High Priest); then there was *The Lesser Sanhedrin*, made up of twenty three men; and finally, a yet smaller group called, *The Inferior Court*. The larger of these divisions dealt with big cases such as a High Priest, a false prophet, or matters concerning a whole tribe; the middle group dealt with matters punishable by death; and *The Inferior Court* dealt with minor cases such as theft or personal injury.

Alfred Edersheim tells us, "*The power of the Sanhedrin would, of course, vary with political circumstances, being at times almost absolute, as in the reign of the Pharisaic devotee-Queen, Alexandra,*

while at others it was shorn of all but ecclesiastical authority."² This 'House of Scholars,' as it has been called, was in effect a Rabbinic parliament. It was before the Sanhedrin that the Lord Jesus stood trial³, as did the apostles in the book of Acts⁴ - albeit for mock trials.

Revived again

When the Sanhedrin met for the last time, some of them 'prophesied' that they would one day be restored in Tiberias, and then move to Jerusalem. Amazingly, on 13th October 2004, seventy one of the most highly respected rabbis in Israel received a special ordination in Tiberias as the new Sanhedrin. They then officially reconvened on the 20th January 2005 to begin issuing legal rulings. Among those who were ordained was *Rabbi Yisrael Ariel*, head of the Temple Institute in Jerusalem, *Ovadia Josef*, a former Chief Rabbi of the Sephardic (Middle Eastern) Jews, and *Josef Elyashiv* former Chief Rabbi of the Ashkenazi (European) Jews.

They prefer to call themselves '*the Nascent Sanhedrin*,' or, '*the developing Sanhedrin*.' This is

because some members believe they have yet to achieve the legal status of the last Sanhedrin, and therefore they are still working towards that goal. When all these men were appointed they signed a promise that if a better scholar than themselves stepped forward they would willingly stand down to make room for him. As their temporary president, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz said in his accepting speech: "*A lot of patience and work is needed. I'd be happy if in another few years these chairs are filled by scholars who are greater than us and we can say, 'I kept the chairs warm for you.'*"

Ready for the last days

Nevertheless, the restoration of this extremely significant Jewish institution is a remarkable development before the return of our Lord Jesus Christ and a sure sign that we are in the last days. Not only is it further evidence that the 'fig tree' of Israel is still continuing to bud⁵, but such a ruling body is a necessary requirement for other Bible prophecies to come to pass as well.

For a start, the Bible predicts in numerous places that the Jewish

people will rebuild their much lamented temple again. Daniel, the Lord Jesus, Paul and John (in that order) all prophesied such an event in their end time prophecies⁶, and a Sanhedrin will be needed to not only appoint a High Priest to minister there, but to also decide on the exact location for the temple itself. *In fact, both of these tasks are already being discussed by this new group.*

Then consider the fact that a Sanhedrin will be the most likely way for the Jewish people to (mistakenly) recognise the Antichrist as their messiah when he comes. The Lord Jesus said to the Jewish leaders of His own day, *“I have come in My Father’s name, and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name [ie, Antichrist], him you will receive.”*⁷ Remember, it was the Jewish leaders who stirred up the crowd to ask for Barabbas⁸ instead of Jesus. This is exactly what will happen again in the future: they will choose another instead of Christ.

Perhaps, also, the Sanhedrin is the group Daniel refers to when he says of the Antichrist: *“Then he shall confirm a covenant with many...”*⁹

(Hebrew: ‘RAB’). The *“many”* is a reference to the Jewish leaders who will confirm a covenant (treaty?) with this future Hitler who will ultimately deceive the nation and lead them to another holocaust. Maybe one of them is, *“the worthless shepherd”* of Zechariah 11:17.

Certainly, when the Lord Jesus warned His disciples that in the end times men would, *“deliver them up to councils,”*¹⁰ this could be one of the groups that Jewish believers will find themselves standing before – just as they did in the book of Acts.

However, we also hope that it will be the Sanhedrin who will eventually recognise the Lord Jesus as the true Messiah and lead the nation in repentance before He comes, as Zechariah prophesied.¹¹ This would be the best thing that they could ever do.

Not beyond God’s reach

Yes, the significance of the reconvened Sanhedrin is enormous for prophetic fulfilment. It is a wonder that it has received so little attention by prophecy students. It is certainly another encouragement to

those of us who are longing for the Lord’s appearing that it is getting closer all the time.

But as we watch these things take place before our eyes, let us also pray for these men to be saved. Remember that it was to Nicodemus, *“a ruler of the Jews,”* that the Lord Jesus said, *“You must be born again,”*¹².....and we know what happened to him, don’t we?¹³

¹ Numbers 11:16-17

² *“The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah,”* by Alfred Edersheim, [1.98] p68 Hendrickson edition.

³ Matthew 26:57-68

⁴ Acts 4:5-22/6:8-15/23:1-10

⁵ Matthew 24:32

⁶ Dan.9:27; Matt.24:15; 2 Thess.2:4; Rev.1:1-2

⁷ John 5:43

⁸ Matthew 27:20

⁹ Daniel 9:27

¹⁰ Mark 13:9

¹¹ Zechariah 12:10-13:1

¹² John 3:1-7

¹³ See John 7:50-52/19:39 for evidence of Nicodemus conversion. According to a note in *The Preachers Homiletic Commentary* on John’s Gospel (p85), *“The Talmud mentions again and again a person of this name (Nakedimon), also called Bounai, reckoned to the number of Jesus’ disciples”*