

JUDICIAL COURTS The place where legal disputes were considered and decisions were rendered. A body of people convened to deliberate on and decide legal matters.

Introduction

The arrangement of judicial courts changes as the biblical record progresses historically. Judicial courts began as informal systems within the family and clan structure of the ancient Near East. They eventually became an integral part of the nation of Israel and then of the conquering empires.

Judicial Courts in Palestine and the Ancient Near East

Ancient Near Eastern social structures, as attested by archaeological finds and the biblical record, offer clues about the way ancient societies in [Palestine](#) practiced justice (Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, 295).

Family-Based Social Structure

In the ancient Near East, all levels of society—including the judicial system—fell into a family and clan-based social structure (Puckett, “Law and Authority in Ancient Israel,” 1:173–74). Communities consisted of houses containing a nuclear family arranged in compounds. Nearby communal family tombs held multiple generations (Stager, “Archaeology of the Family,” 20). The biblical mentions of the “father’s house” ([בֵּית אָב](#), *beith av*) or “clan” ([מִשְׁפָּחָה](#), *mishpachah*) attest to these communal compounds. The oldest male ruled in such households. The story of [Abram](#), [Sarai](#), and [Hagar](#) recorded in [Gen 16:5–6](#) depicts judicial rule by the head of a clan. In this passage, Sarai brings a charge against her maid Hagar and appeals to Abram’s authority. She takes action against Hagar only after Abram

gives her permission to do so. [Genesis 38:24](#) also attests to judicial rule by the head of a clan, as [Judah](#) pronounces sentence upon his daughter-in-law, [Tamar](#), when she is [found pregnant](#). Matthews points out that the biblical record provides no indication of a presentation of evidence, defense, or official hearing (Matthews, *Manners and Customs in the Bible*, 30).

Broader Social Structures and Judicial Proceedings

Over time, the structure of society in Palestine began to broaden. Households formed into clans based on a common ancestry, which in turn joined together to form tribes (e.g., [Josh 7:14–18](#); [1 Sam 10:18–21](#); Kessler *The Social History of Ancient Israel*, 54; Dever, *The Lives of Ordinary People*, 187; Puckett, “Law and Authority in Ancient Israel,” 1:178–80).

Because of the interrelatedness of this type of social structure, disputes involving parties with close family ties were normally settled more quickly than those between distant kin or strangers (compare [Gen 13:5–11](#) and [Gen 26:12–23](#); Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel*, 28; Puckett, “Law and Authority in Ancient Israel,” 1:200–03). Ancient peoples often employed self-enforcement to settle such disputes. An example is the [blood-feud](#), in which the nearest of kin avenged a family member’s death, either through retributive killing ([Num 35:16–21](#)) or by accepting payment ([Exod 21:29–30](#); de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 10–12). Another means of streamlining the judicial system was the practice of arbitration (Puckett, “Law and Authority in Ancient Israel,” 1:207–11). The goal was the restoration of harmonious relations in the community (Puckett, “Law and Authority in Ancient Israel,” 1:212).

In the case of an obvious violation or of a [confession](#) by the guilty party, the punishment was administered immedi-

ately in a manner proportionate with the violation (Puckett, “Law and Authority in Ancient Israel,” 1:227). The mediator was usually the head of a family, community, clan, or tribe. Kessler notes that a group of leaders, or “elders,” could also perform this function, as could “the men of the city”—a group of men designated to speak on public matters (e.g., [Judg 8:5, 8–9](#); Kessler, *Social History*, 60). The elders at times intervened proactively for the sake of peace (Puckett, “Law and Authority in Ancient Israel,” 1:232). These early ancient Near Eastern judicial proceedings generally followed an archetypical pattern, which is embodied in [Ruth 4](#) (Puckett, “Law and Authority in Ancient Israel,” 1:277–78):

- presentation of the case ([Ruth 4:3–6](#));
- decision ([Ruth 4:7–10](#));
- exposition of the law ([Ruth 4:10](#)).

Early Israel

During the period of the settlement in [Canaan](#), the influence of the elders grew as that of the tribes decreased ([Deut 21:18–21](#); de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 12). Elders held power in urban areas and where several larger kinship groups or clans lived together. The elders typically met in the gate or at the entrance to the settlement ([Deut 22:15](#); [25:7](#); Puckett, “Law and Authority in Ancient Israel,” 1:272–73).

The family and clan-based structure did not disappear altogether. Terms such as “father’s house” ([בֵּית אָב](#), *beith av*), “clan” ([מִשְׁפָּחָה](#), *mishpachah*), and “tribe” ([שֵׁבֶט](#), *shevet*) began to be used interchangeably, indicating that the judicial system itself was entering into a state of flux (Puckett, “Law and Authority in Ancient Israel,” 1:258).

Human and Divine Judgment Working in Concert

[Leviticus 18](#) stresses that all law—whether secular or sacred—has a divine origin (e.g., compare [Lev 18:6, 21](#); de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 154). In early Israel, the primary role of the human judge was to discern Yahweh’s judgment on a matter. The [Old Testament](#) presents three ways whereby a human judge might discern [Yahweh’s](#) judgment:

1. The parties could “come before God” ([Exod 22:6–8](#)). Although the exact meaning of this phrase is unclear, Shapira suggests that, based on the context of the passage, it may refer to some kind of oath that the two parties were required to take (Shapira, “For the Judgment is God’s,” 280–82).
2. The suspected party could undergo an “ordeal” or physical test to determine guilt or innocence. [Numbers 5:11–31](#) describes a [trial by ordeal](#) in the event that a husband suspected his wife of committing [adultery](#). In such cases, the husband was to bring his wife before the priest, who would then require her to drink bitter [water](#). A swollen stomach indicated guilt, and the lack of it exonerated her.
3. Ancient Israelite judges could seek Yahweh’s will by the ancient Near Eastern practice of casting [lots](#) ([Josh 7:10–26](#); compare [Jonah 1:7](#); Shapira, “For the Judgment is God’s,” 277–80).

A person’s relationship to the community was central to the workings of [justice](#) in early Israel. Individual rights or duties were viewed within the larger matrix of total relationship with another. Even though a person’s right might have been violated in a specific instance, any complaint brought to court might be disregarded because the aggrieved party was not found to be in harmony with the community or family (Puckett, “Law and Authority in

Ancient Israel,” 1:312).

Witnesses

The Bible provides regulations for the role of witness in ancient Israel. A false witness was condemned to suffer the same fate the accused person would have suffered ([Deut 19:16](#); Puckett, “Law and Authority in Ancient Israel,” 1:274–75). Two or more witnesses were required to convict a person ([Num 35:30](#); [Deut 17:6](#); [19:15](#); Puckett, “Law and Authority in Ancient Israel,” 1:274). [Deuteronomy 17:7](#) indicates that in capital cases, the witness initiated the execution ([Deut 17:7](#); Puckett, “Law and Authority in Ancient Israel,” 1:275).

Priests

Although the law ascribed certain judicial functions to the [high priest](#), his actual judicial function was limited in early Israel ([Lev 14:36](#); [27:8](#), [11](#)). Resorting to a divinely-appointed authority left no room for compromise or negotiation—God’s authority could not be challenged (Wilson, “Enforcing the Covenant,” 70). Israelites usually turned to the priest for one of two reasons: either because the dispute could not be resolved through normal judicial proceedings, or because it expressly involved the religious life of the community (Puckett, “Law and Authority in Ancient Israel,” 1:310):

1. The dispute could not be resolved through normal judicial proceedings.
2. The dispute involved an issue that expressly involved the religious life of the community.

Judges

The term “judge” could refer to one of two types of people

in the Bible:

1. Professional judges appointed to administer justice. [Deuteronomy 16:18–20](#) commands the Israelites to appoint professional judges in every town ([Deut 16:18–20](#); see [2 Chr 19:4–11](#)). According to [Deuteronomy 17:8–13](#), these judges served as a court of appeals to which the elders of the town might resort (de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 153).
2. Ad hoc leaders who arose prior to the period of the monarchy in response to a national or local crisis (Kessler, *Social History*, 61). Any judicial role was largely subsumed under the broader function of general governance. The primary exception to this pattern in [Samuel](#), whose circuit of judgeship appears to have involved an actual judicial role (see [1 Sam 7:16–17](#); de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 151).

Role of the City Gates

As [nomadic tribes](#) came in contact with settled towns and cities, the city gate—the center of community life—became the natural place to seek justice (see [Deut 21:19](#); [22:15](#); Puckett, “Law and Authority in Ancient Israel,” 1:312). The judicial process at the gate normally included four steps (Willis, “Elders in Pre-exilic Israelite Society,” 185):

1. private accusation;
2. official proceeding at the gate, involving evidence and witnesses;
3. conference and decision by the elders;
4. application of the sentence by the elders and community.

Agreement between the elders and the “men of the city” regarding the verdict was essential, as it was the men of the city who actually carried out a sentence. ([Deut 21:20–21](#);

22:21; Willis, “Elders in Pre-exilic Israelite Society,” 186). In capital cases, trial and punishment took place at the city gate (Frese, “Civic Forum,” 244). The public nature of the proceedings was meant to discourage others from repeating the crimes being punished (Frese, “Civic Forum,” 245). The prophets insisted the city gates be a place where justice prevailed (Isa 29:21; Amos 5:10, 12, 15; Zech 8:16). However, some specific cases could be brought before the priest in the sanctuary or some other holy place (Judg 4:5; 1 Sam 7:16; Jer 26:10).

The Monarchy

The judicial system took on a more formal, centralized structure during the period of the monarchy, when the king and those appointed by him administrated justice. Even so, semi-autonomous groups based on kinship also continued to hold influence in this period (Kessler, *Social History*, 88). In addition, the newly reorganized, state-sponsored priesthood was active in the judicial process (Puckett, “Law and Authority in Ancient Israel,” 2:109–10).

The earliest monarchs (Saul, David, and Solomon) had to carefully balance the interests of their subjects with their own interests in order to prevent a fissure in the kingdom. Puckett notes that as the power of the kingship grew, it became increasingly difficult to separate judicial responsibilities and political opportunities (Puckett, “Law and Authority in Ancient Israel,” 2:168). Those who failed to keep the two in balance faced internal strife and even division of the kingdom (1 Kgs 12:1–33).

The Judicial Role of King in the Early Monarchy

The judicial role of the king was patterned on leaders prior to the monarchy, including Moses (Exod 18:13) and Joshua (Josh 7:16–25). Several biblical passages attest to the king’s

judicial role. [Second Samuel 8:15](#) describes David as having administered “justice and equity” (ESV). [Psalm 72:1–2](#) records a prayer that the king might judge justly ([Psa 72:1–2](#); de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 151). Absalom’s activity at the city gate further connects kingship with a judicial role ([2 Sam 15:4](#); de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 152).

Solomon was particularly known for his propensity for justice ([1 Kgs 3:28](#)). His palace included a “hall of judgment,” where he weighed the cases brought to him ([1 Kgs 7:7](#); de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 152). Notable examples of Solomon’s administration of justice include his expulsion and eventual execution of Shemei ([1 Kgs 2:26–46](#)) and his settling of the two prostitutes’ dispute over a baby ([1 Kgs 2:16–28](#)).

Judicial System in the Divided Kingdom

During the era of the [divided kingdom](#), judicial authority in the southern kingdom of Judah became increasingly consolidated around the judges in [Jerusalem](#). [Exodus 18:13–26](#) indicates that prior to the monarchy, there was a two-tiered judicial system with Moses at the higher level, and appointed judges at the lower level. During the divided kingdom, [Jehoshaphat](#) initiated a system that involved three levels ([2 Chr 19:4–11](#); Jung, “Judicial System in Ancient Israel,” 129):

1. the king;
2. the [higher appointees](#) in Jerusalem;
3. the lower local appointees in the fortified cities.

Jehoshaphat also stressed the connection between human and divine justice, recognizing that decisions of the appointed judges were being made on behalf of Yahweh Himself ([2 Chr 19:6–7](#); Jung, “Judicial System in Ancient

Israel,” 290). However, while the judges in early Israel saw themselves in more of a discerning role, seeking to determine Yahweh’s will, the judges in Jehoshaphat’s time saw themselves in more of a representative role, judging on Yahweh’s behalf.

Generations later, [King Hezekiah](#) consolidated the judicial system further. Puckett argues that under King Hezekiah’s leadership, the state took up most of the judicial authority, as judges were tasked with hearing and deciding cases in the king’s name. This hold on power likely was weaker at the outskirts of the kingdom. In addition, the state-sponsored priesthood continued to exert some degree of influence, along with the elders and heads of households, though the rulings of the latter group were being enforced by the central authority. The state at times gave its authorization to the local judicial body, so that previous clan or local enforcement became official legal action, along with the state-sponsored [priesthood](#) (Puckett, “Law and Authority in Ancient Israel,” 2:213–14). Although the vestiges of the old judicial system continued to function, their decisions were sanctioned, and carried out, by the state.

Exilic Court Systems

During the exile, the Jews were subject to the judicial system of the governing nations of that time: [Babylon](#) and [Persia](#).

The Legal System in Babylon

[Daniel 2–3](#) depicts King [Nebuchadnezzar](#) as the ultimate judge who is free to order execution without counsel ([Dan 2:5, 9; 3:15](#)). Wiseman argues this was expected from kings of ancient [Mesopotamia](#), who had strong senses of divine appointment (Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon*, 99). According to Babylonian documents, Nebuchadnezzar had

a passion for justice and built up the Babylonian court system (Wiseman, *Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon*, 99). The narrative of the fiery furnace illustrates how the legal system worked during his reign. The process takes this form:

- issuance of decree ([Dan 3:1–6](#));
- offense observed (implied in [Dan 3:12](#));
- accusation ([Dan 3:12](#));
- opportunity to reform ([Dan 3:13–15](#));
- testimony by the defendants ([Dan 3:16–18](#));
- verdict ([Dan 3:19–20](#));
- application of the sentence ([Dan 3:21–23](#)).

A unique feature of this account is that King Nebuchadnezzar offered [Shadrach](#), [Meshach](#), and [Abednego](#) an opportunity to reform. Collins suggests they may have been given this opportunity due to their high rank (Collins, *Daniel*, 187). Hill suggests it is because the king had previously found them useful (Hill, “Daniel,” 80).

The Persian Legal System

[Esther 1](#) provides a glimpse of judicial proceedings in the royal Persian court. The narrative depicts King [Ahasuerus](#) as a supreme judge and as conferring with his [wise men](#) ([Esth 1:13–21](#)), who were likely legal experts (Berlin, *Esther*, 16). Although the accused (Queen [Vashti](#)) is not present and thereby is given no opportunity to make a defense, the rest of the procedure takes a common form:

- accusation ([Esth 1:15–16](#));
- deliberation ([Esth 1:16–20](#));
- verdict ([Esth 1:21](#));
- application of the sentence ([Esth 1:22](#)).

Bush suggests the Jewish author of the [book of Esther](#) may

have emphasized the penalty, which applied to all women in the kingdom, in order to highlight the folly of the [Persian](#) legal system (Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 350–51). The [book of Daniel](#) likewise depicts the Persian legal system as foolhardy ([Dan 6:6–15](#)), as [King Darius](#) finds himself entrapped by his own code, where any law officially issued by the king was considered irrevocable (Keil and Delitzsch, *Ezekiel, Daniel*, 632). Montgomery considers this narrative to be a classic case of a naïve monarch being outwitted by his own laws (Montgomery, *Daniel*, 275).

Judaeen Judicial Courts under Roman Rule

In the [New Testament](#) era, two major sources of power shaped the judicial system:

1. The [Sanhedrin](#), the Jewish court led by the chief priest and the powerful Sadducee party;
2. The [Roman Empire](#), which had a highly structured system of governance and judicial practice.

The Sanhedrin held a prominent role in the Gospels and the early part of [Acts](#). However, as the church began to take the gospel into [Gentile](#) territory, the Roman court system became more prominent.

The Sanhedrin

The Sanhedrin consisted of 70 common members plus the high priest. There were 69 members, and Moses was considered the 70th member. The common members were divided into three courts of 23 judges (Hoenig, *The Great Sanhedrin*, 72–73). In addition to this central body, the Sanhedrin appointed smaller, lower courts throughout the land called Muflaim (Hoenig, *The Great Sanhedrin*, 96). Appeals from smaller bodies could be forwarded to the full Sanhedrin (Hoenig, *The Great Sanhedrin*, 91). The decisions

made by the Sanhedrin were considered final (Hoenig, *The Great Sanhedrin*, 85). [Jews](#) were loyal to their decisions even if they lived among other nations (Hoenig, *The Great Sanhedrin*, 87).

The Sanhedrin was composed of priests, [Sadducees](#), and [Pharisees](#). Even though the Pharisees were not the majority party in this ruling body, they at times had the ability to persuade the entire group, often through the influence of individuals from distinguished families (e.g. [Acts 5:34–40](#); Mason, “Chief Priests,” 168, 176–77). The Sadducees were known for their savage punishments ([Josephus, Antiquities 20.9.1](#)). Josephus records that the Sadducees commanded the effort to have [James](#) the brother of [John](#) executed ([Josephus, Antiquities 20.9.1](#)).

The Sanhedrin convened on short notice and the rendered judgment swiftly. Josephus almost always speaks of the Sanhedrin being convened and dissolved on a single occasion (Mason, “Chief Priests,” 160). However, they took care to avoid making a rash judgment in capital cases. There were no sessions the day before a [Sabbath](#) since the long recess for Sabbath observance was considered unnecessarily cruel (Hoenig, *The Great Sanhedrin*, 106).

In religious cases, the Sanhedrin had the authority to excommunicate or execute the guilty party (Hoenig, *The Great Sanhedrin*, 88, 95). They also had police forces at their disposal, tried capital cases, and executed offenders. Yet the Sanhedrin had to weigh their actions carefully, as popular support from the common people was essential in maintaining social order (Mason, “Chief Priests,” 176). They were always subject to [Rome](#), who even had authority to appoint the high priest (Gill, “Acts and Roman Policy in Judea,” 17).

The New Testament period witnessed ongoing tension between the Sanhedrin and Roman authorities. Josephus

records that, after the Sanhedrin executed [James](#), the brother of [Jesus](#), some of the citizens of Jerusalem notified King [Agrippa II](#) and Albinus (the Judaeen [procurator](#)) that the Sanhedrin had convened without prior approval. As a result, the high priest Ananus was removed from office ([Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.9.1](#)). During this time, the Roman officials alternated between passivity and heavy-handedness in their governance. The state of ongoing tension between Rome and Jerusalem helps to explain [Felix](#) and [Festus](#)' reluctance to release Paul as they sought to stay in favor with the Jews ([Acts 24:27; 25:9](#); Gill, "Acts and Roman Policy in Judaea," 25).

The Trial of [Jesus](#)

The Gospels record that prior to His [crucifixion](#), [Jesus](#) was put on trial before the [Sanhedrin](#). Two charges were laid against Him:

1. That He had spoken against the temple, which was considered a capital crime by the Sanhedrin (Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 370). Turner argues that the Romans later considered this a capital crime on the grounds of sedition (Turner, *Matthew*, 639).
2. That He had committed [blasphemy](#), which was punishable by stoning. The [Mishnah](#) defined blasphemy simply as speaking the divine name of [Yahweh](#) (Danby, *Tractate Sanhedrin*, 98), but other Jewish documents defined blasphemy more broadly (Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation*, 110–12). Bock notes that for someone to consider himself worthy to sit at the right hand of God was considered blasphemous and unthinkable (Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation*, 183).

Brown points out that [Jesus](#)' [trial](#) before the Sanhedrin does

not align with many of the rules that were laid down for the Sanhedrin in the Mishnah (Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 359). France notes, however, that the Mishnah was not written until roughly AD 200 (France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 601). Bock suggests that Jesus' appearance before the Sanhedrin may not have been an official trial—the Sanhedrin may have convened for a preliminary hearing called for the purpose of determining the validity of charges that could be forwarded to Pilate (Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation*, 190–95).

Because Jews did not normally have the authority to administer capital punishment, Jewish authorities took Jesus before the Roman prefect Pilate for a second hearing (Köstenberger, *John*, 525–26; Marcus, *Mark* 8–16, 1026). A procurator represented the emperor in fiscal affairs, and a prefect or governor represented him in civil and criminal matters (Marcus, *Mark* 8–16, 1026). Pilate lived in Caesarea but was in Jerusalem to ensure peace during the Passover festival, which brought large numbers of Jews to the city (France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 625). He was reluctant to get involved with Jesus' case because the Romans usually referred internal Jewish affairs to the Jewish courts (Keener, *John*, 1104–05, Köstenberger, *John*, 521). Turner further points out that the Roman Emperor Tiberius was critical of any ruling official who showed too much leniency to traitors or who treated his subjects with undue harshness (Turner, *Matthew*, 699).

The Jews played on Pilate's fear that Jesus was creating a threat to the public order (Matt 27:24) and Roman authority through His messianic claim (Luke 23:2; John 19:12; Bovon, *Luke* 3, 243–45; Marshall, *Luke*, 852–53). Jesus' prophecy that He would be seated at the right hand of power implied that He would be sitting on a throne (Mark 14:62), which

led to a charge of blasphemy and insurrection (Marcus, *Mark* 8–16, 1009; France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 634).

The *Gospel of John* indicates that *Jesus* was flogged before He was sentenced to die (*John* 19:1). *Matthew* and *Mark* place the flogging after the sentencing (*Matt* 27:26; *Mark* 15:15). Köstenberger maintains that Pilate gave *Jesus* a light flogging during the trial, then a severe flogging that was normally administered just prior to crucifixion (Köstenberger, *John*, 531).

The Apostles before the Sanhedrin

The account of the trial of *Peter* and *John* recorded in *Acts* 4–6 depicts the Sanhedrin as a judicial body with considerable power. The outcome of the trial indicates that the Sanhedrin had the power not only to arrest and interrogate, but to determine the type of public activity that was acceptable in *Jerusalem* (*Acts* 4:18; Cassidy, *Society and Politics*, 41). The judicial process in *Acts* 5:27–40 included the following steps (Cassidy, *Society and Politics*, 40):

1. accusation (*Acts* 5:28);
2. defense (*Acts* 5:29–32);
3. deliberation (*Acts* 5:33–39);
4. verdict (*Acts* 5:40a);
5. punishment (beating and further threatening; *Acts* 5:40b).

The account of *Stephen's* trial before the Sanhedrin in *Acts* 6:12–7:1 similarly depicts the Sanhedrin as a judicial body with broad-ranging authority (Cassidy, *Society and Politics*, 40). This account portrays the *high priests* as having great latitude in the exercise of their power, albeit under the shadow of Roman imperial authority (Cassidy, *Society and Politics*, 40). Unlike *Jesus's* trial, *Stephen's* case did not go

before the Roman authorities (Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 341). His punishment takes place without a sentencing phase in the trial. The Jews may have justified their actions by noting that Stephen's speech ended with a verbal assault on the temple—a capital offense. Brown notes the Jews would have had to notify the Roman authorities of the case (Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 370).

The Judicial Structure in the Roman Empire outside of Judaea

Four types of territories existed under Roman rule:

1. senatorial provinces;
2. imperial provinces;
3. territories administered by Roman client-kings;
4. “free” cities.

Judaea

In the New Testament period, *Judaea* was an *imperial province* under the governorships of *Antonius Felix* (Acts 23:24) and *Porcius Festus* (Acts 24:27). An imperial province was overseen by a Roman governor appointed by the emperor. The governor had imperial troops at his disposal to keep public order and respond to outside threats (Cassidy, *Society and Politics*, 83–84).

Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia

In contrast, *Macedonia*, *Achaia*, and *Asia* (Acts 16–19) were senatorial provinces. The governors of a senatorial province were selected by the Roman senate and were members of the senate. They usually had previous experience at a lower level, either as a consul in Rome or as a praetor. Since their responsibilities in the provinces mirrored the consuls in *Rome*, they were given the title *proconsul* and were granted

complete authority within the boundaries of their province. Because Roman control was more solidified in the senatorial provinces, [Roman troops](#) were not deemed necessary there.

Thessalonica and Philippi

[Thessalonica](#) and [Philippi](#) were both in the senatorial province of Macedonia. Thessalonica had the distinction of being one of the “free” cities of the empire. It was semi-autonomous, having an elected city council that elected magistrates (politarchs) to oversee the local governance. In judicial matters, [politarchs](#) were subject to the proconsul, especially in matters involving Roman [citizens](#) like Paul (Cassidy, *Society and Politics*, 84). Paul’s traveling companion Jason was taken before these politarchs when the Jews stirred up the crowds in Thessalonica (e.g., [Acts 17:5](#); Cassidy, *Society and Politics*, 89).

In Philippi, the magistrates—much like the politarchs of Thessalonica—were given authority over a wide range of social and economic activities at the local level, but were still subject to the provincial proconsul and the provincial governor (Cassidy, *Society and Politics*, 85). They had authority to call for troops, if they were deemed necessary. They were primarily responsible to keep public order and peace (Cassidy, *Society and Politics*, 87).

The magistrates in Philippi had [Paul](#) and [Silas](#) beaten and jailed without trial ([Acts 16:22–23](#)). Consequently, Paul rebuked them upon his release from [prison](#). [Acts 16:38](#) records the magistrates were afraid when they learned that Paul was a Roman citizen; they were apparently aware of their accountability to the provincial proconsul and to the governor, and of their duty to administer their responsibilities in an orderly fashion ([Acts 16:37–38](#)).

Corinth and Ephesus

The governing and judicial structure of [Corinth](#) largely mirrored that of Philippi. However, because it was the capital city of a senatorial province, it was also the seat of the proconsul. [Acts](#) names the proconsul as [Gallio](#) ([Acts 18:12–17](#)) but makes no mention of a magistrate or council.

[Ephesus](#) had a similar arrangement to Thessalonica and Corinth. The senate-appointed proconsul ruled over the entire province, and the city itself was ruled by the council and elected magistrates. Ephesus also had a clerk who held considerable power in the local community (Cassidy, *Society and Politics*, 85–86). His actions of quieting the people, upbraiding them, and dismissing the assembly attest to his authority to act decisively ([Acts 19:35–41](#); Cassidy, *Society and Politics*, 86). The city clerk was motivated by a desire to keep public order ([Acts 19:40](#); Cassidy, *Society and Politics*, 93–94).

Paul's Arrest and Trial

The different applications of [justice](#) in [New Testament](#) times largely depended on one's status with Rome, as demonstrated by Paul's experience in [Jerusalem](#). When a riot occurred after Paul had been seen at the [Jerusalem temple](#), the Roman commander seized Paul ([Acts 21:27–36](#)) and prepared to punish him by scourging. When Paul mentioned his Roman citizenship, the commander instead ordered the Sanhedrin to convene for an official trial ([Acts 22:21–30](#); Cassidy, *Society and Politics*, 98–100). After the initial meeting ended in an uproar ([Acts 23:6–10](#)), a second trial was arranged. This one was more orderly, following a standard pattern for such proceedings ([Acts 24:1–22](#)):

- accusation;
- defense;

- decision.

When Festus succeeded Felix as governor, he too allowed for an orderly procedure ([Acts 25:7–12](#)). The process continued according to the pattern under Felix with the notable addition that, in this case, Festus conferred with his counselors before rendering a decision. When [Agrippa](#) arrived, the procedure varied again. The [Sanhedrin](#) was absent at this trial, and Festus presented the accusation secondhand. Paul's defense became more of an effort to persuade Agrippa to become a [Christian](#), and there was no decision except to adhere to the previous one made by Festus ([Acts 25:24–26:32](#)). The prerogative of [Rome](#) to [oversee](#) Jewish proceedings is clear here, as the Roman legal system overrides the Sanhedrin's demand for an immediate death sentence (Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 367).

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