

Matthew 26:3-5

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-26/matthew-263-5/>

Meanwhile the chief priests plot with their high priest, Caiaphas, how and when they will destroy Jesus. They decide it is best to do this away from the crowds.

The parallel gospel accounts of this event are found in Mark 14:1-2 and Luke 22:1-2.

This event is commonly known as “The Plot to Kill *Jesus*.”

Around the same time that *Jesus* was reminding His disciples that He would be handed over to be crucified at Passover, which was only two days away (Matthew 26:1-2), *the chief priests and elders gathered together* in order to bring about this very prophecy.

The chief priests likely refer to the party known as the Sadducees. The Sadducees controlled the temple and conducted the sacrifices on behalf of *the people* to God. It was *they* who *Jesus* implicated and exposed when He said *they* had made the temple into a den of thieves, putting their own financial interest ahead of that of the people (Matthew 21:13). In doing this, *Jesus* threatened the lifestyle and power of the Sadducees.

The elders of the people likely refer to the party of the Pharisees. The Pharisees saw themselves as the guardians of Jewish faith and culture. *They* taught *the people* in the local synagogues. *They* were generally well regarded by the people. It was the Pharisees who *Jesus* castigated for hypocrisy in Matthew 23, saying their external appearance bore no resemblance to their internal reality:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

(Matthew 23:27-28)

In making this accusation, *Jesus* threatened the power and prestige of the Pharisees.

The two parties of the Sadducees and Pharisees were rivals and competed with one another for affection from and influence over *the people*. *They* were such bitter rivals that rather than come to agreement, they invited Rome to mediate between them to see who should rule Israel. Rome chose a third option: Rome. Thus, Roman rule in Israel was due to their self-seeking ways. Both the Sadducees and Pharisees saw Rome as an enemy. But *they* perceived *Jesus* as a greater threat.

However, after *Jesus*’s humiliation of both groups in the temple during the week of Passover (Matthew 21:12-23:39), they decided to put aside their rivalry and colluded *together to seize Jesus and kill Him*. *Jesus* united these political rivals by creating a common enemy. He was a threat to them because He exposed them for exploiting rather than serving the people. This

overturns the basic principle of God's law, to serve God by loving and serve others (Matthew 22:36-40).

In their collaboration against *Jesus*, the rivals will also coerce Rome into collaborating with them by committing blasphemy, telling the Roman governor Pilate that they have no king but Caesar. In doing so, they will box him into a political dilemma of choosing between *Jesus* and their allegiance to Caesar (John 19:15). In order to protect their prestige, these rival parties will themselves choose Caesar over *Jesus*, whom God sent to be their long-awaited Messiah. And *they* will collude with Rome to murder the Messiah, rather than repent and enter His kingdom.

The chief priests and elders gathered together in the court of the high priest, who was named Caiaphas.

The high priest was the highest religious office in Israel. This office went back to the time of Moses (Numbers 35:25). It was a position of great honor, responsibility, and influence. In addition to offering national sacrifices and mediating between God and the nation, *the high priestly* responsibilities seem to have included being a sort of treasurer of the Temple (2 Kings 12:10; 22:4). By the time of the New Testament, it appears that there was some sort of term limit placed upon the office of *high priest*. For instance, John tells his readers twice that *Caiaphas* “was high priest that year” (John 11:49; 18:13).

Caiaphas was the son-in-law of Annas, who had previously served as *high priest* (Luke 3:2) when John the Baptist first began to preach in the wilderness. Annas seems to have been the real political power behind this office for some time. Luke tells us in Acts that Annas was the leading figure present along with “all those of high-priestly descent” at John and Peter’s trial (Acts 4:6). It is possible that *Caiaphas* owed his position as *high priest* in no small degree to the fact that he was related to Annas.

Their gathering took place in *the court of the high priest*. This expression may refer to

a designated space for *the high priest* to hear matters and deliberate with his officers and render judgments. Or it could be a figure of speech describing the official presence of *the high priest* when he was “in *court*” deliberating official priestly business.

If the *court* was a physical location, presumably it was located somewhere on or near the temple grounds. John wrote that after *Jesus* was arrested, the Roman cohort first took Him to Annas (John 18:13) and John later refers to this place as *the court of the high priest* (John 18:15). Luke identifies the place where *Jesus* was brought for trial as “the house of the high priest” (Luke 22:54). Putting their remarks together it seems that *the court of the high priest* where *Jesus* was brought for trial was Annas’s house. Archeologists believe the site where Annas’s house is located is just outside the southwest corner of the temple complex. (See picture and map in Additional Resources) .

The court of the high priest, named Caiaphas may have been the same place where *Jesus* will soon be tried—the house of Annas (with *Caiaphas* present). Or it could refer to *Caiaphas*’s residence or court of business.

This secret meeting *in the court of Caiaphas* may have been what *they* agreed to do a few days earlier when *they* were in the temple, after Jesus's "Parable of the Vine Growers" and subsequent teaching (Matthew 21:40-46). At that time, we were told, that *the chief priests* and Pharisees sought to seize *Him*, but because *the people* considered *Him* to be a prophet, the religious leaders feared them (Matthew 21:45-46). This *stealth* gathering may have been the agreed upon next step in their plot.

The reason for their *stealth* was because *they* did not want *the people* to know that *they* plotted to *kill Jesus*. Executing *Him* would be deeply unpopular. *They* were afraid *they* would lose their influence and position of power if *the people* knew what *they* were doing. And if it caused a stir, *they* would not only lose *the people's* respect and affection which they craved (Matthew 23:6), *they* also risked bringing unwanted scrutiny from Rome.

Both the Sadducees and the Pharisees' hold on power was maintained by remaining in Roman favor. So, *they* had to manage a delicate balance; the Roman occupation was deeply resented by the people, so the Sadducees and Pharisees had to be officially anti-Rome, while simultaneously ingratiating themselves to Rome. Their influence required them to cause Rome to believe *they* were necessary to retain order while convincing the people *they* were on their side in opposition to Rome. Accordingly, *they* were experts in deception. So, what we will observe of their plotting to assassinate *Jesus* will display their skillset in political maneuvering.

Therefore, *they* were cautious. As *they* plotted together, *they* were constantly reminding themselves, "Not during the festival, otherwise a riot might occur among the people." A riot would be a double-disaster. It would reduce their effectiveness in the eyes of Rome, meaning Rome might remove them as rulers. It would also jeopardize their influence with the people, which was their main asset in serving Rome to maintain order.

The festival *they* were referring to was the Passover festival that was two days away (Matthew 26:2). Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, estimated that that the total population of the city and the surrounding area swelled to "not less than three million" at this time of year (Josephus, "The Wars of the Jews" Book 2. 280). Having *Jesus* killed with so many enthusiastic supporters in town for *the Passover festival* would be difficult and very dangerous for *the priests and elders*.

And so, as much as *they* wanted to *kill Him* now, *they* decided to wait for a less risky time. But an unexpected opportunity would shortly present itself, changing their minds to *kill Jesus* sooner rather than later (Matthew 26:14-16).

Biblical Text

³ Then the chief priests and the elders of the people were gathered together in the court of the high priest, named Caiaphas; ⁴ and they plotted together to seize Jesus by stealth and kill Him. ⁵ But they were saying, "Not during the festival, otherwise a riot might occur among the people."