



Peter's Three Denials of Jesus

[Rick Aschmann](#)

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[Chronology of the Four Gospels](#)

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1. The Problem

It is difficult to arrange the accounts of Peter's three denials of Jesus in the four gospels in such a way as to fit them nicely into the surrounding material, so various writers and commentators have assumed that we have accounts of more than three denials, even though Jesus said in all four gospels that Peter would deny him "three times". For example, F. LaGard Smith, author of the *The Narrated Bible* assumes that the synoptic gospels do not actually include the first denial, only John. Alternatively, William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, authors of *Baker's New Testament Commentary*, arrange it the other way around, assuming that John leaves out the first denial and divides the third denial into two parts, so that there must have been at least four denials. In both cases these are authors I very much respect, and they don't agree at all, which shows how difficult the problem is. And Harold Lindsell "found the differences between the Gospels' accounts of Peter's denials so great that he postulated that Peter actually disavowed knowing Jesus six times!", according to [Craig Blomberg at the link below](#).

But if the Bible really is the [inerrant, inspired Word of God](#), as we believe, then it would be hard to reconcile Jesus' clear statement in all four gospels that Peter would deny him "three times" with a conclusion that he denied him more than three times! (Interestingly, the above authors don't seem to worry too much about this, though they all certainly believe in inerrancy.) This is simply one example among many that shows the difficulty of harmonizing multiple biblical accounts of the same event, throughout the Bible, but we must never doubt that somehow these accounts really are in harmony, even though we struggle to see how.

However, it is a fact that *each of the four gospels lists exactly three denials*, and that though there are differences in their descriptions, there is really no reason to assume that they are not the same events, as [Craig Blomberg](#) points out, except for the last denial, about which Blomberg says: «we may just have to assume that more than three people accused Peter, even if he denied it only three times. After all, "the bystanders" already suggests more than one person making the final accusation. In any event, there is no threat to the inerrancy of Scripture.» I have followed many of Blomberg's ideas in rearranging the material from the order given in *The Narrated Bible*, and have also gotten some ideas from lifeofchrist.com/Life/Harmony, ([archived link](#)) which rearranges the material in much the same way as I have.

However, one area in which I have not agreed with Blomberg is that I agree with the assumption made by the ESV and most other Bibles that Mark's statement that the rooster crowed for the first time in Mark 14:68 was in the original text, which matches Mark's statements in Mark 14:30 and 72 that the rooster crowed twice. Many commentators also hold this position, including *Baker's New Testament Commentary*. The texts below are from the ESV. The issue, of course, is that only Mark says that the rooster crowed twice: all the other gospels only say that it crowed once. But this simply means that Mark's narrative is more complete in this respect.

2. Assumptions and Background

An important assumption in this rearrangement is that Annas and Caiaphas lived in the same house, but this is very probable, since Annas was Caiaphas' father-in-law. (See my article [Jewish Priests in the New Testament](#).) Thus the [secret](#) trial before Annas would [perhaps](#) have been in his private chambers, but the [secret](#) trial before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin would [perhaps](#) have been in a [larger, more](#) public chamber of some kind. (However, Annas evidently showed up for that meeting also, since it repeatedly says "[chief priests](#)" in these

passages, all of which I have marked in orange. See my article [Jewish Priests in the New Testament](#) for more on this.) The later, “official” trial before the full Sanhedrin the next morning would presumably not have been at Caiaphas’ house, but at the usual meeting place of the Sanhedrin, which according to the [Wikipedia article](#) was in a building at the temple.

The probable layout of the house is very helpfully explained in *Baker’s New Testament Commentary*: «What follows cannot be understood apart from a knowledge of the construction of an Oriental palace or house of the well-to-do. Such a house looks into its own interior; that is, its rooms are built around an open courtyard. An arched passage leads from the heavy outside *door* or (better) *gate* into this inner court. In this passage there is a place (in some houses a little room) for the gatekeeper. Sometimes, as also in the present instance, the court was lower than the rooms which ranged around it (see Mark 14:66: “Peter was *beneath* in the court”).»

3. Format

In the texts in the chart below I have marked in blue each case of a person who accused Peter of being a disciple of Jesus. I have marked other key information in red.

This chart essentially matches the Trial before the Jewish Authorities section in [Chronology of the Four Gospels](#). The background and cell outline colors and format are the same as in [Chronology of the Four Gospels](#) (though not the text colors, as I specify above). See the key to these there. In particular, text with a yellow background is assumed to not be in chronological order.

4. A Harmony of the Four Accounts

	When and Where	Matthew 26:57-27:1	Mark 14:53-15:1a	Luke 22:54-71	John 18:13-27
To Annas’ & Caiaphas’ house	Jerusalem, private home	26:57: ⁵⁷ Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest , where the scribes and the elders had gathered.	14:53: ⁵³ And they led Jesus to the high priest . And all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together.	22:54a: ⁵⁴ Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest’s house ,	
Before Annas first					18:13-14: ¹³ First they led him to Annas , for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas , who was high priest that year. ¹⁴ It was Caiaphas who had advised the Jews that it would be expedient that one man should die for the people.
Peter follows into the courtyard (John also?!)		26:58: ⁵⁸ And Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest , and going inside he sat with the guards to see the end.	14:54: ⁵⁴ And Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest . And he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire.	22:54b: and Peter was following at a distance.	18:15-16: ¹⁵ Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Since that disciple was known to the high priest , he entered with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest , ¹⁶ but Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest , went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door, and brought Peter in.
Peter denies Jesus the first time		26:69-71a: ⁶⁹ Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard . And a servant girl came up to him and said, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.” ⁷⁰ But he denied it before them all, saying, “I do not know what you mean.” ⁷¹ And when he went out to the entrance ,	14:66-68a: ⁶⁶ And as Peter was below in the courtyard , one of the servant girls of the high priest came, ⁶⁷ and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, “You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus.” ⁶⁸ But he denied it, saying, “I neither know nor understand what you mean.” And he went out into the gateway ²	22:55-57: ⁵⁵ And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them. ⁵⁶ Then a servant girl , seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, “This man also was with him.” ⁵⁷ But he denied it, saying, “Woman, I do not know him.”	18:17-18: ¹⁷ The servant girl at the door said to Peter, “You also are not one of this man’s disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.” ¹⁸ Now the servants ³ and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself.
A rooster crows (the first time)			14:68b: and the rooster crowed . ⁴		

Trial before Annas					<p>18:19-24: ¹⁹ The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. ²⁰ Jesus answered him, “I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. ²¹ Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them; they know what I said.” ²² When he had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, “Is that how you answer the high priest?” ²³ Jesus answered him, “If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?” ²⁴ Annas then sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.</p>
Trial before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin		<p>26:59-66: ⁵⁹ Now the chief priests and the whole council⁵ were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, ⁶⁰ but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward ⁶¹ and said, “This man said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.’” ⁶² And the high priest stood up and said, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?”⁶ ⁶³ But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” ⁶⁴ Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” ⁶⁵ Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. ⁶⁶ What is your judgment?” They answered, “He deserves death.”</p>	<p>14:55-64: ⁵⁵ Now the chief priests and the whole council⁷ were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. ⁵⁶ For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. ⁵⁷ And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, ⁵⁸ “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’” ⁵⁹ Yet even about this their testimony did not agree. ⁶⁰ And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?”⁸ ⁶¹ But he remained silent and made no answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” ⁶² And Jesus said, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” ⁶³ And the high priest tore his garments and said, “What further witnesses do we need? ⁶⁴ You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?” And they all condemned him as deserving death.</p>		
They beat and mock Jesus		<p>26:67-68: ⁶⁷ Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, ⁶⁸ saying, “Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?”</p>	<p>14:65: ⁶⁵ And some began to spit on him and to cover his face and to strike him, saying to him, “Prophecy!” And the guards received him with blows.</p>	<p>22:63-65: ⁶³ Now the men who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking him as they beat him. ⁶⁴ They also blindfolded him and kept asking him, “Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?” ⁶⁵ And they said many other things against him, blaspheming him.</p>	
Peter denies Jesus the second time	<p>“A little later” (Luke 22:58)</p>	<p>26:71b-72: another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.” ⁷² And again he denied it with an oath: “I do not know the man.”</p>	<p>14:69-70a: ⁶⁹ And the servant girl saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, “This man is one of them.” ⁷⁰ But again he denied it.</p>	<p>22:58: ⁵⁸ And a little later someone else saw him and said, “You also are one of them.” But Peter said, “Man, I am not.”</p>	<p>18:25: ²⁵ Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, “You also are not one of his disciples, are you?” He denied it and said, “I am not.”</p>

Peter denies Jesus the third time	“About an hour later” (Luke 22:59)	26:73-74a: ⁷³ After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you.” ⁷⁴ Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know the man.”	14:70b-71: And after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, “Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.” ⁷¹ But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know this man of whom you speak.”	22:59-60a: ⁵⁹ And after an interval of about an hour still another insisted, saying, “Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean.” ⁶⁰ But Peter said, “Man, I do not know what you are talking about.”	18:26-27a: ²⁶ One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, “Did I not see you in the garden with him?” ²⁷ Peter again denied it,
A rooster crows (the second time)		26:74b: And immediately the rooster crowed.	14:72a: ⁷² And immediately the rooster crowed a second time.	22:60b: And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed.	18:27b: and at once a rooster crowed.
Jesus looks at Peter, who weeps		26:75: ⁷⁵ And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.	14:72b: And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, “Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.” And he broke down and wept. ⁹	22:61-62: ⁶¹ And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.” ⁶² And he went out and wept bitterly.	
The Sanhedrin condemns Jesus	a building at the temple?	27:1: When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death.	15:1a: And as soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council.	22:66-71: ⁶⁶ When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people gathered together, both chief priests and scribes. And they led him away to their council, and they said, ⁶⁷ “If you are the Christ, tell us.” But he said to them, “If I tell you, you will not believe, ⁶⁸ and if I ask you, you will not answer. ⁶⁹ But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God.” ⁷⁰ So they all said, “Are you the Son of God, then?” And he said to them, “You say that I am.” ⁷¹ Then they said, “What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips.”	

5. Implications for Inerrancy and Inspiration

The comparison of these passages points out an important issue when we say that we believe in the inerrancy and inspiration of God’s Word. What we mean is that God supervised the composition of the Bible so that it would be completely reliable, and would communicate God’s message accurately. What we do *not* mean is that each writer necessarily remembered and wrote down 1) the exact words spoken at any given time, or 2) the exact details of events that occurred, if those words or details are not critical to our understanding of the message. These passages are a good demonstration of this: the accounts of 1) what people said and 2) what happened vary considerably in these passages, and it is quite possible that none of them provide the exact wording or details in some instances. What is interesting is that God could have made sure that the gospel writers recorded these details more exactly, but instead he was content to use their memories of the situation. Sometimes God clearly dictated material verbatim, as in Genesis 1:1-27 (since no human being was there to witness those events!) or in many of the prophecies, but here he clearly did not do so.

6. Sources and Eyewitnesses of These Narratives

An interesting issue is: Who were eyewitnesses to these events and who were not? Of the 4 gospel writers, only one, John, was apparently present when these events occurred.¹ Matthew 26:56 says, “Then all the disciples left him and fled”, and Mark 14:50 says, “And they all left him and fled”, so it is clear that only John and Peter (at a distance) followed Jesus. Peter very likely provided Mark with his information,¹⁰ which may be why he is the only one who reported that the rooster crowed twice, and that Jesus had said that it would do so: Peter would be the one most likely to remember this, since it affected him so personally. John, on the other hand, is the only one who mentions “the other disciple”, that is, himself, and gives the further information that “Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest”, so John was evidently known to be Jesus’

disciple, but because of his connections he was allowed in, and moreover was able to get Peter in. Matthew was one of the disciples who fled, so he would have had to get his information second-hand from Peter and John, and Luke was almost certainly not yet a disciple, and probably did not research his material until much later.¹⁰

John is the only one who mentions or gives details of the trial before Annas, which suggests that he attended it, which is also the idea of *Baker's New Testament Commentary*. This is also suggested by the fact that John does not appear to be present during Peter's denials.

However, it is unclear whether John attended the subsequent two trials, since he does not provide any details of them; he may not have attended them, or else he simply chose to omit them. Matthew and Mark may have gotten their information about the secret trial before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin at Caiaphas' house from some other source. Similarly, Luke likely got his information about the "official" trial before the Sanhedrin from some other source. Luke's details, related in Luke 22:67-71, show similarities to the earlier trial before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin as related by Matthew and Mark, but this was obviously a separate event. *Baker's New Testament Commentary* says, "The reason this meeting was called was in all probability to give a semblance of legality to the proceedings against Jesus." Trials were not supposed to be held at night or in secret, as *Baker's New Testament Commentary* points out.

It is interesting that only Luke mentions that Jesus looked at Peter after the third denial. It seems probable that Luke got this detail from Peter himself. *Baker's New Testament Commentary* speculates that "What happened...was probably this: Jesus, his night trial ended, was being led across the court to his prison cell, from which within a few hours he would be led once more before the Sanhedrin." This is possible, though it is simply speculation.

¹ John the apostle, author of the fourth gospel, never mentions himself by name in his gospel, except indirectly as one of the two "sons of Zebedee" in John 21:2, apparently to show humility. Instead, he apparently refers to himself in other ways, as tradition confirms. He is almost certainly the "disciple whom Jesus loved" in John 13:23-25, 19:26-27, 20:2-3, and 21:7,20. He is also probably the "disciple who testifies" in John 19:35 and 21:24. And in this role he is quite possibly the other disciple who is not named in John 1:35-40 and in John 18:15-16. See [Apostles.html](#).

² **Mark 14:68** Or *forecourt*

³ **John 18:18** Or *bondservants*; also verse [26](#)

⁴ **Mark 14:68** Some manuscripts omit *and the rooster crowed*

⁵ **Matthew 26:59** Greek *Sanhedrin*

⁶ **Matthew 26:62** Or *Have you no answer to what these men testify against you?*

⁷ **Mark 14:55** Greek *Sanhedrin*

⁸ **Mark 14:60** Or *Have you no answer to what these men testify against you?*

⁹ **Mark 14:72** Or *And when he had thought about it, he wept*

¹⁰ See section [4. The dating of other books of the New Testament in WherePaulsLettersWereWritten.html](#).