

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

BIBLE STUDY TEXTBOOKS SERIES

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Volume Four

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

INTRODUCTION

MATTHEW'S METHOD

In connection with this chapter two significant, apparent contradictions appear in Matthew's writing. From a careful reading of John 12:1-8, 12-19 with attention to chronological detail, it is clear that, upon arriving in the Jerusalem area, Jesus and the Twelve stopped for the evening at Bethany. Then, the day before the Triumphal Entry, He was anointed by Mary during a supper in the house of Simon the leper. Next day (John 12:12), He organized and executed the Royal Messianic Entry into Jerusalem (John 12:14-19). Matthew and Mark, however, reserve their narration of the supper and the anointing in Bethany until later in their text, thus giving the impression that this latter event did not occur until late in the Last Week. (Cf. Matt. 26:6-13 = Mark 14:3-9 in context.) It must be noticed, however, that neither Matthew nor Mark introduces the section in question with strict, chronological precision. Rather, both use the indefinite formula: "Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper . . .," without specifying when that took place. Further, what must not be missed in Matthew and Mark is the fact that it was precisely because of what occurred at the anointing in Bethany that Judas Iscariot went away to bargain with the chief priests to betray Jesus (Matt. 26:14ff. = Mark 14:10ff.). This is the cause, although he waited until later to present himself to the authorities. (Cf. Matt. 26:3-5, 14-16 = Mark 14:1f., 10f. = Luke 22:1-6.) This is no hazarded guess, because John informs us that it had been the thief, Judas Iscariot, that had objected so strenuously to the "waste" of money involved in the lavish anointing at Bethany (John 12:4ff.). It was to Judas that Jesus addressed His rebuke. The solution, then, to the apparent contradiction is that John records the Bethany supper in its normal time sequence and clearly identified Judas as the trouble-maker, whereas Matthew and Mark prefer to link Judas' later perfidy with the Bethany supper by means of a historical flash-back.

The second problem apparent in Matthew's narration is the way he rearranges the chronology of the cleansing of the temple and the withering of the fig tree. Mark states that Jesus did nothing in Jerusalem on the day of the triumphal entry (Mark 11:11), cursed the fig tree next morning on the way to Jerusalem from Bethany (Mark 11:12-14), then cleansed the temple (Mark 11:15-19). Matthew, on

the other hand, gives the clear impression that the culminating act of the triumphal entry was the cleansing of the temple (Matt. 21:12ff.) which was followed on Monday by the cursing of the fig tree (12:18f.) and the disciples' amazement apparently immediately thereafter (Matt. 21:20ff.). Mark, on the other hand, reserves the disciples' amazement for Tuesday (Mark 11:20). Here again it must be noticed that Matthew does not date the cleansing of the temple as occurring on the same day as the triumphal entry, even if a cursory reading would lead to this conclusion. Further, the expression "early" (*proi*, Matt. 21:18) does not mean "in the morning" in the same sense as "next day" (*tê epaurion*, Mark 11:12). So, while Mark intends to indicate the sequence of days, Matthew is giving the time of day without indicating on what day the cursing of the fig tree occurred.

Mark's is evidently the more detailed account, stating chronologically what actually happened. Matthew, on the other hand, aiming at succinctness, merely telescoped his version without denying that the disciples' amazement and Jesus' teaching occurred the following day. In fact, Matthew does not affirm "WHEN the disciples saw" that the fig tree had withered. His circumstantial participle (*kai idôntes hoi mathetai ethaûmasan . . .*) affirms nothing about the chronology of the withering and the seeing, because its purpose is only to say that whenever it was that the disciples saw it, they marvelled. (See notes on Matt. 21:19f.) Matthew's method has the advantage of keeping together the two separate parts by welding them into one didactic unit.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE OUTLINES

- Section 54 Jesus Enters in Messianic Triumph into Jerusalem (21:1-11)
- Section 55 Jesus Cleanses Temple a Last Time and Receives Worship of Children (21:12-17)
- Section 56 Jesus Curses Fig Tree and Teaches Disciples Faith (21:18-22)
- Section 57 Jesus Meets Challenges of His Authority (21:23-45)
 - A. The Authority Behind John's Baptism (21:23-27)
 - B. The Parable of Two Sons (21:28-32)
 - C. The Parable of Vineyard Let Out to Unworthy Tenants (21:33-45)

THE MESSIANIC TRIUMPH

STUDY OUTLINE

THE MESSIANIC TRIUMPH (21:1-11)

- I. The decision to depend on lowly donkeys (21:1-3)
- II. The Deliverer's divine dignity shows by divesting Himself of it (21:4, 5)
- III. The excited crowd expects the fulfilment of their dreams (21:6-9)
- IV. The dim-sighted demonstrate the unbelief that determined their destiny (21:10)
- V. The disciples display their own conclusions (21:11)

THE TEMPLE CLEANSED (21:12-17)

- I. A radical restoration of repentance and renewal (21:12)
- II. A rational rebuke of this form of religion (21:13)
- III. The believers were rewarded for receiving the Redeemer (21:14)
- IV. Radiant rejoicing is offensive to the Pharisees (21:15a)
- V. A Refined Reminder (21:16)
- VI. A return for reflection and rest (21:17)

THE WITHERING OF THE FIG TREE (21:18-22)

- I. PUNISHMENT FROM GOD FOR HYPOCRISY AND BARRENNESS (21:18, 19)
 - A. The Sterile Fig Tree
 1. The justice of Jesus' expectation to find fruit on the tree: "Leaves promise fruit."
 2. His just expectation was disappointed: "Nothing but leaves."
 3. The justice of Jesus' judgment: He simply hastened the inevitable judgment that had to come in the course of nature.
 - B. The Polluted Temple (21:12-17, according to Mark's order of events)
- II. POWER FROM GOD THROUGH FAITH, PRAYER AND MERCY (21:20-22)
 - A. The Disciples' surprise (21:20; Mark 11:20, 21)
 - B. The Lord's lesson (21:21, 22; Mark 11:22-25)
 1. "Mountains of difficulty can be removed from the path of duty by undivided trust" (21:21).
 2. "Trusting prayer, confident of God's power and concern, is assured of its answer" (21:22).

JESUS' AUTHORITY CHALLENGED (21:23-45)

- I. THE AUTHORITIES ATTACK: "PRODUCE YOUR ORDERS!" (21:23).
The authorities attack: "Produce your orders!" (21:23).
- II. JESUS COUNTERATTACKS: "JOHN'S AUTHORITY IS INDICATIVE OF MINE" (21:24-27).
 - A. Before being given new revelations, you must face previous ones fairly.
 - B. If John's authority was from God, listen to him, since he testified to me.
 - C. If you cannot discern John's authority, by what right do you seek to judge mine, when your admission of disability disqualifies you?
 - D. John was called directly by God to serve, without human authorization: I am too.
- III. JESUS DRIVES FOR DECISION: "DECIDE ON AN OBJECTIVE CASE: THE STORY OF THE TWO SONS" (21:28-32).
 - A. Religious outcasts and rank sinners repent and are considered qualified to enter God's Kingdom.
 - B. Religious professionals do not repent and are rightly rejected by God.
 - C. Although repentant sinners precede the more respectable sinners, opportunity is yet available for a change of mind.
- IV. JESUS SHOWS HIS PROPER PLACE IN GOD'S ETERNAL PROGRAM WHILE REVEALING THE FATE OF THOSE WHO OPPOSE HIM (21:33-45).
 - A. Bountiful mercy (21:33)
 - B. Mercy's rights (21:34)
 - C. Mercy outraged (21:35)
 - D. Increased guilt versus incredible patience (21:36)
 - E. Mercy resolute (21:37)
 - F. Mercy mistaken for weakness (21:38)
 - G. Mercy rejected (21:39)
 - H. Mercy finally ended (21:40)
 - I. Mercy offered to others (21:41)
 - J. Mercy's victory (21:42)
 - K. The reading of the sentence (21:43)
 - L. Double punishment inflicted (21:44)
 - M. Jesus' story hit home (21:45)
 - N. The clergy fumbles its responsibility (21:46)

Section 54

JESUS ENTERS JERUSALEM IN MESSIANIC TRIUMPH

(Parallels: Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:29-44; John 12:12-19)

TEXT 21:1-11

1 And when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and came unto Bethphage, unto the mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying unto them, Go into the village that is over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose *them*, and bring *them* unto me. 3 And if any one say aught unto you, ye shall say, the Lord hath need of them; and straightway he will send them.

4 Now this is come to pass, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through the prophet, saying,

5 Tell ye the daughter of Zion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, Meek, and riding upon an ass, And upon a colt the foal of an ass.

6 And the disciples went, and did even as Jesus appointed them, 7 and brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their garments; and he sat thereon. 8 And the most part of the multitude spread their garments in the way; and others cut branches from the trees, and spread them in the way. 9 And the multitudes that went before him, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest.

10 And when he was come into Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, Who is this?

11 And the multitudes said, This is the prophet, Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Men usually conceive of Jesus as a mild-mannered gentleman too humble for such ostentatious display as we see clearly occurring during His entry into Jerusalem here. Why do you think Jesus would desire to ride into Jerusalem? And why on such an animal?
- b. Why do you suppose Jesus sent two disciples to get the donkeys—would not one disciple have sufficed to bring them back?
- c. Why would Jesus instruct the men to take the animals without first asking permission of the owner?
- d. Do you think there was any virtue in riding upon a colt that has never been broken for riding? If so, what? If not, why not?

- e. Do you see anything significant about Jesus' prepared answer: "The Lord has need of them"? Does the Lord really need anything—much less a pair of donkeys?! If so, what does this tell you about Him?
- f. Why did Jesus order them to bring two animals when one would have sufficed?
- g. How did Jesus know about the donkeys tethered outside the doorway of a house in a street over at Bethphage? Did some disciple tell Him about them? Had He already prearranged for His borrowing them at this later time?
- h. Why, when the disciples brought Jesus the donkey and her colt, did they blanket both of them with their robes? Did they think He could ride both of them?! And why, when Jesus had the larger animal available, did He choose to ride the colt?
- i. What do you think is Matthew intending to convey to his readers by including a prophecy that he himself does not quote verbatim and actually changes by mixing another prophet's words together with the one he quotes? Is this proper? Matthew left out of his quotation "triumphant and victorious is he" (RSV) or "just and having salvation" (ASV). Do you think this omission is significant?
- j. Do you think the Apostles and nearer disciples understood what was taking place during the Triumphal Entry?
- k. Usually, pictures of the triumphal entry show people waving palm branches in the air. What does the Bible say was the main purpose for the greenery cut for use that day?
- l. Explain the conduct and mentality of this crowd that praises God for the mighty works Jesus did and that shouts joyfully its happiness with Jesus as the Prophet and as Son of David, the King and Ambassador of the Lord. What did they expect the "coming kingdom of our father David" to be? To what, in their minds, is this procession going to lead?
- m. Explain the Lord's thinking behind this scenario: what were some of His feelings as He rode along? (Cf. Luke 19:40-44.) In what sense is it true that He actually *needed* these donkeys, i.e. what part did they play in His planning?
- n. Why would the people of Jerusalem, agitated by the excitement caused by Jesus' entry, have to ask, "Who is this?" Do you think they had absolutely no idea as to His identity?
- o. Why do you think that the crowds answered the Jerusalemites' question, "Who is this?" by saying, "This is the Prophet, Jesus of Nazareth of Galilee"?

- p. Mark informs us that Jesus went into the temple, but, as it was already late, He merely looked round at everything and went out to Bethany with the Twelve (Mark 11:11). Why do you suppose Jesus did not attack the temple corruption immediately that day while popular support was great and enthusiasm for His cause highest? What could be gained by waiting until the next morning (Mark 11:12, 15)?
- q. How does the triumphal entry harmonize with everything that Jesus had taught previously? How does the Entry, as Jesus conceived of it, perfectly reflect His thinking, rather than the usual world conqueror's ambition?
- r. On what basis would you explain the fickleness of some of Jesus' well-wishers evident in their willingness one day to shout "Hosanna" and later "Crucify Him!"? Do you think *everyone* did this? Why or why not?

PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

On the next day after the anointing of Jesus by Mary in Bethany, just six days before the Passover, a large number of pilgrims who had come to the Passover festival heard that Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem. So they took palm branches and went out to meet Him, cheering: "Hosanna! Blessings upon Him who comes as God's Ambassador, even the King of Israel!"

Meanwhile Jesus and His disciples had almost reached Jerusalem, having come as far as the little towns of Bethphage and Bethany, situated on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. Then Jesus sent two of the disciples on ahead with these instructions: "Go into the village just ahead of you. Just as you enter it you will find a donkey tethered with her colt that has never been broken for riding. Unhitch them and bring them here to me. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' or 'Why are you doing this?' or says anything to you, just reply, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them back with you."

This took place to fulfil what was predicted by the prophet Zechariah (9:9f.):

Tell Jerusalem and its inhabitants: Here is your King: He is coming to you in gentleness, riding on a donkey, Yes, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.

So those disciples went off on their mission and followed Jesus' instructions and found everything just as He said they would. They

found the colt tethered by a doorway out on a street corner, like He said. As they were untying the colt, its owners who stood there, demanded an explanation: "What are you doing there, untying that colt?"

And they made the reply that Jesus had furnished: "The Lord needs it." So the men let them take them. They brought the ass and the colt to Jesus, flung their robes over them like a saddle-blanket and helped Jesus to get on. He mounted the colt and sat on the garments. This had been described in Scripture:

Do not be afraid, city of Zion: see, your King is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!

His disciples did not understand this at the time. Later, however, when Jesus had been exalted to glory, they remembered that the Scripture said this about Him and that this was in fact what had been done for Him.

Now as He rode along, most of the crowd began carpeting the road with their own robes, while others cut down branches from the trees and still others spread His path with boughs they had cut from the fields. As He approached the place where the road follows the slope down the Mount of Olives, the whole procession—those in front of Jesus that came out of Jerusalem to meet Him, as well as those who followed behind Him,—in their joy began to sing aloud their praises to God for all the tremendous miracles they had seen Jesus do. (In fact, the crowd that had been present when Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead, kept telling what they had witnessed. This is why the crowd went out to meet Him: they had heard that He had performed this miraculous sign of His mission.) They were chanting: "Hurrah for the Son of David! God bless the King who comes in the Name of the Lord! Blessings on the coming kingdom of our father David! Praise be to God in the highest heaven! May there be peace in heaven and glory to God in the highest heavens!"

Some Pharisees in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, restrain your disciples!"

But He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would burst out cheering!"

Then the Pharisees said to each other, "You see? There is nothing you can do! Why, the whole world is running off after Him!"

When He came in sight of the city, He wept over it, saying, "If you only knew at this late date the things on which your peace depends. . . . Now, however, you cannot see it. In fact, the time will

come when your enemies will raise siegeworks all around you and surround you, blockading you from every direction. They will level you to the ground, and your children within your walls. They will not leave you one stone in its place, all because you did not recognize that God had visited you!"

And when He entered Jerusalem, a shock wave of excitement shook the whole city. "Who IS this?" people asked. And the crowds kept saying, "This is the Prophet, Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee." And He went into the temple courts, where He looked at the whole scene, noticing everything that was going on. But, as it was already late in the afternoon, He went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

SUMMARY

Upon His arrival in the Jerusalem area Jesus organized a public demonstration of His royal Messiahship, wherein He rode into the city amidst the popular acclaim of Israel. His mild manner, when contrasted with worldly triumphs, served to underline the perfect, profound harmony between His methodology and that predicted by the prophet Zechariah. He refused to concede the opposition's demand that He desist by silencing the popular praise, while at the same time He foresaw the nation's fall because of popular rejection of His mission. His Messianic entry caused the otherwise indifferent to ask who it was that caused this uproar. The happy crowds described Him as "the Prophet Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee."

NOTES

21:1 **And when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem**, Jesus and His disciples were arriving from Jericho where He had saved Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) and healed blind Bartimaeus and his friend (Matt. 20:29 = Mark 10:46ff. = Luke 18:35ff.). If Jesus left Jericho in the morning, He and His group could have walked the 25 km (15 mi.) road uphill to Jerusalem that day. John informs us that the Lord arrived in Bethany in the eastern outskirts of Jerusalem, while the other travellers presumably continued on to Jerusalem to seek lodging for the night. (Cf. John 12:2, 12.) While in Bethany, either Friday evening after the long journey or Saturday evening after the Sabbath, a supper was offered in Jesus' honor in the house of Simon the leper, at which time Mary, sister of Lazarus, anointed Him with precious ointment (Matt. 26:6-13 = Mark 14:3-9 = John 12:1-8).

Just **when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem** is not stated by Matthew, but by John, who dates Jesus' arrival as "six days before the Pass-over" (John 12:1). John states that "a great crowd of the Jews learned that He was there (at Bethany) and they came, not only on account of Jesus, but also to see Lazarus whom He had raised from the dead" (John 12:9). Time, therefore, is necessary for word to spread among the festal pilgrims, inciting them to hurry to Bethany. Further, more time is required for this excitement to be reported back to the authorities (John 12:10f.).

Note how Matthew and Mark introduce their account with: "while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper." They may have done this, not only because they recount their story out of chronological order, but perhaps because a stay of some time was involved, i.e. Friday night and Saturday too. Word got around that Jesus had come, so the streets of Bethany were filled Saturday evening with people curious to see Jesus and Lazarus. Next day (John 12:12), or Sunday morning, Jesus launched the messianic entry into Jerusalem.

In light of the above, Matthew's expression, **and came unto Bethphage**, is not intended to ignore or deny Jesus' stop in Bethany, since our Apostle intends to recount this event later (26:6ff.). Rather, his mention of Bethphage is intended to say, simply, that Jesus will start the triumphal entry from this general staging area. Bethany and Bethphage were apparently two little villages not far apart on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives east of Jerusalem. Today, unfortunately, no trace of Bethphage remains, while Bethany is identified in the Arab town of El 'Azariyeh. Nor is it any longer possible to affirm just how the ancient roads would have approached Jerusalem from Jericho, or precisely which Jesus would have used during the triumphal entry. **The mount of Olives** is a ridge in the hill country of Judea, parallel to mount Zion or Moriah on which Jerusalem is built and separated from the latter by the narrow Kedron Valley (Valley of Jehoshaphat). Because the elevation of the temple area of Jerusalem is 744 meters (2440 ft.) as opposed to Olivet's 814 m (2670 ft.), when Jesus arrived at the crest of Olivet, He could have looked across the Kedron Valley that separated the two parallel eminences and seen all Jerusalem laid out before Him. Because the western part of the city back of the temple area rises from 30 to 40 meters (100-300 ft.), He would have been able, from His vantage point, to see buildings even farther away on that side of the city. In fact, the entire city seems laid out, map-like below the viewer,

with the map slightly raised in back so that it slopes toward the viewer. This detail is vividly recalled by Luke (19:41). While in Bethany, however, Jerusalem would be out of sight on the other side of the hill. Thus, He first saw the City when He approached it over the top of Olivet during the Messianic entry.

It is not unlikely that **Jesus sent two disciples**, because, although one man accustomed to handling animals could easily bring back the mare which would be followed by the colt, He preferred to use two men on this errand as on others. (Cf. Mark 6:7; Luke 9:51; 10:1; Mark 14:13). Further, "the testimony of two men is valid" (cf. John 8:17), hence would more likely be credible for anyone challenging their right to take the donkeys. *Jesus sent*: this deliberate choice, when seen in context with all of the public notice He sought throughout the rest of this day, His accepting Messianic praise from the crowd, His adamant refusal to silence the people's joyous acclamation when the Pharisees demanded it, is but the beginning of a deliberate assertion of His Messiahship and His invitation to the nation to acknowledge Him as such.

21:2 **saying unto them, Go into the village that is over against you.** If Jesus spent Saturday night in Bethany (John 12:1-11), He is now there looking in the direction of Bethphage that now lay "just ahead of you," to which He directs two Apostles. **Ye shall find an ass tied:** near the entrance to the village "immediately as you enter it" (Mark 11:2). They easily located the animals in question "tied at the door out in the open street" (Mark 11:4). It is impossible to decide whether the animals' owner lived in the house in Bethphage, or whether He were merely a Passover guest. Although normally animals would be led through a doorway into a courtyard surrounded by the house with its connecting buildings, their owner could have left them hitched out on the street for some other reason. Had the owner promised Jesus they would be left there?

Mark and Luke describe the colt as one "on which no one has ever yet sat." Does this fact suggest the usual qualification of an animal to be consecrated to the Lord? (Cf. Num. 19:2; Deut. 21:3.) If so, it is surprising that Matthew entirely ignores this detail so suggestive to a Jewish reader. However, even non-Jewish readers could appreciate the choice of an animal to be ridden "for the first time in an unusual situation" (Philistines, I Sam. 6:7).

And a colt with her. The ass-colt would not likely have been newborn, if it must be strong enough to carry Jesus. **Loose them and bring**

them unto me. See on 21:5 why Jesus desired both animals, not merely the colt.

21:3 And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, The Lord has need of them, and he will send them immediately. Some commentators see these instructions as furnishing evidences of divine foreknowledge: Jesus precisely (1) the number and kind of animals; (2) where they would be found; (3) the friendly, willing reaction of their owner. Support offered for this conclusion is as follows:

1. Some see a parallel between these rapid-fire orders concerning the finding of the donkeys and the arrangements for finding and preparing the upper room for the Passover (Mark 14:12-16 = Luke 22:7-13), in both of which His miraculous insight is thought to be discernible.
2. Luke's expression, "they found it just as he had told them," *heûron kathôs eîpen autoîs*; 19:32), communicates the impression that Jesus used supernatural knowledge, by pointing to the precise correspondence (*kathôs* = "just as") between Jesus' prediction and what the men encountered at Bethphage.
3. Although Matthew's expression seems weaker than that of Luke ("they did just as *kathôs*, Jesus had directed them," 21:6), Plummer (*Matthew*, 294f.) sees supernatural knowledge implied even here, since the Apostles could not even have done as He had appointed "if what they found had not agreed with what He had foretold."
4. The strongest argument for supernatural knowledge is the exact timing: Jesus, even as He was speaking, knew that both animals were tied at the door of a house precisely at the moment He needed them and was ordering His disciples to go bring them back.

The weakness of this conclusion lies in the following unprovable presuppositions: (1) It is assumed that in the Gospels we have absolutely every detail of this event. (2) It is assumed Jesus had never previously talked with the donkeys' owner about borrowing the animals for precisely this use at this time; (3) It is assumed that the owner himself was not a Galilean disciple traveling with Jesus, but a dweller in Bethphage who hardly knew Jesus. Nevertheless, other principles would also lead us to discount the above conclusion:

1. The parsimony of miracles. The sobriety with which Bible writers refuse to multiply miracles, in contrast to apocryphal miracle-mongers, and the Lord's own habit of not resorting to supernatural means where natural ones were available, would suggest

prudence in pronouncing the event in question as miraculous, especially where our Evangelists do not so pronounce it.

2. The confessed incompleteness of Gospel records. (Cf. John 20:30; 21:25.) Not only are whole events omitted, but also unimportant details in those recorded. By simply inventing another series of possible details, it is possible to see that no miracle was intended by the Evangelists. Jesus had been to the Bethany-Bethphage areas just a few months before (John 11:17f.) and could have prearranged everything with the donkeys' owner then, so that it would only have been necessary to send a couple of men to bring the donkeys. Further, the owner, either a disciple or sympathetic to Jesus' cause, may have promised to leave the animals tied in that particular place, beginning about Saturday of the week just before Passover. **The Lord has need of them**, then becomes a password that indicates to the owner that the moment of which Jesus had spoken earlier had now arrived. This explanation furnished by Jesus to cover the taking of the donkeys, assumes that those who challenged the disciples know exactly who *the Lord* is. In fact, in Greek, *the lord* (*kùrios*) might refer generally to any gentleman. (Cf. Matt. 13:27; 20:8; 21:30, 40; 25:20, 22; 27:63; Luke 13:8, 25; 14:22; note the suggestive use of *kùrios* in Luke 19:33f.: "his lords said to them . . . the Lord has need of him.") For the animals' owners to let two valuable donkeys go off unaccompanied to some unknown "lord" or in the hands of strangers would have been the height of naivetè, if not downright folly. It is more likely that the owners were themselves disciples of "the Lord Jesus." They may have not even been local residents of Bethphage, but Galileans recently arrived in the Jerusalem area for the Passover and lodging with friends in Bethphage. This would explain the details of the text without seeing a miracle of divine knowledge where none was intended.

The Lord has need of them: observe how Jesus identifies Himself to the owners of the donkeys. If this expression is all He said, "it is clear, therefore, that this epithet was not an invention of the early church after Christ's departure . . . not something borrowed from a non-Christian culture. It came from the very mouth of Jesus" (Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 764). Further, beyond the reason assigned for Matthew's citation of Zechariah at precisely this point (see on 21:4), we must see that Zechariah's prophecy is fulfilled by this paradoxical expression of Jesus' Lordship. It is *the Lord*,

not merely of His personal disciples, but the Owner of all things, that now *needs* the asses! What an amazing combination of sovereign dignity, with its authority and power, united with the painful need and destitution of poverty!

21:4 Now this is come to pass, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through the prophet. Note how eager Matthew is to make his point: no sooner has he described the procuring of the donkeys than he passes immediately to the main significance the reader must see in the event described. Reasons for this may be:

1. The very mode of procuring the donkeys is part of the main point:
 - a. Those who see supernatural insight exercised by Jesus, point to His divinity as forepictured by Zechariah.
 - b. It is more likely that Matthew means: "Jesus, whom I present to you as the Messiah of Israel, HAD TO BORROW something required for His purposes!" At first glance the casual reader could snort, "What's the matter: did He not BY RIGHT own sufficient means to avoid the embarrassment of having to requisition the property of others?! What kind of Christ IS this Nazarene, if he can point to no solid real estate, no institutions and property and no hard, countable results?" But this is precisely what Matthew is driving at! The citation of Zechariah's prophecy at this point decidedly meets this kind of thinking head-on by categorically asserting that God had promised just this sort of Messianic King to Israel.
2. Now, if Jesus be the Lord of the Universe, who is the donkeys' true Owner? Can He not make use of what is His own however and whenever He chooses? And is not such divine ownership in perfect harmony with Zechariah's picture of the divine Messiah?
3. By citing the prophecy now, rather than at the end of the section, Matthew induces his reader to begin to interpret the entire scene in the light of all of Zechariah's ideas relevant to the Messiah's coming.

The important question now is: what had Zechariah prophesied during the zenith of the Persian empire under Darius I (522-486 B.C.), Xerxes (or Ahasuerus, 486-465) and possibly Artaxerxes I (465-424)? Just as today, the reader of the Old Testament prophecies in Jesus' day needed to know something of the history contemporary to the prophets themselves, in order to make sense out of their writings. In fact, their prophecies were directed not merely to the future times

in which their later readers would be living, but also to events in the prophets' own times. For them, as for us, the historical connections were important to be able to see the mighty acts of God operative in and through the events. Thus, we may assume that Matthew depends upon the reader's appreciation of Zechariah's message in its proper historical context.

In chapters nine through thirteen, Zechariah described God's future program for both Israel and the Gentiles in terms of four basic emphases: (a) the blessing of Israel by the salvation and refining of a godly remnant; (b) the blessing of the nations by the salvation of a godly remnant from among the Gentiles; (c) the punishment of the ungodly nations who manifest their ungodliness by their hostility to Israel, and (d) the punishment of the ungodly in Israel through the destruction of the old order. Four times in this latter section Zechariah furnishes glimpses of the Servant-King Messiah and His ministry, ALL CITED BY MATTHEW:

1. The Messianic King and His reign (Zech. 9:8-10; cited by Matt. 21:5)
2. The Good Shepherd's ministry unappreciated by Israel and so terminated (Zech. 11:9-14; Matt. 27:9)
3. Israel's bitter wailing over the death of the Pierced One (Zech. 12:10-14; Matt. 24:30)
4. God's Shepherd smitten and His flock scattered (Zech. 13:7; Matt. 26:31)

Matthew does not cite all of Zechariah's messianic prophecies or prophetic allusions, leaving his readers to recall them. (Study Zech. 2:10f.; 3:8f.; 6:12-15.) In fact, he does not even quote Zechariah closely, choosing rather to utilize only certain suggestive portions, but they are heavy with meaning every time.

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! This wording of Zechariah 9:9 Matthew has exchanged for Isaiah's graphic: **Tell the daughter of Jerusalem** (cf. Isa. 62:11), because, not only must the City of God be informed, since she cannot recognize her King who comes to her, but also because other great prophecies other than Zechariah's find their fulfillment in Him who so comes. (Study Isa. 61, 62.) Even John rewords this quotation, weaving in wording from Isaiah 40:9 (LXX) or 44:2. Jerusalem is strangely unable to rejoice because of her indifference toward Him

who was to prove to be her true King. Ironically, the rejoicing and shouting aloud expressed the infectious enthusiasm of only the multitudes of pilgrims present. Jerusalem was no more than mildly interested (21:10). **Lo, your king comes to you.** Zechariah's original readers might have supposed that the victorious conqueror of Syria and Philistia (Zech. 9:1-8) would set the style for the Messianic King, in the power and pomp of an Alexander the Great who so remarkably fulfilled Zechariah's words. Nevertheless, Jerusalem's righteous King has a style far different from the standard operating procedure of earthly rulers. He is to be:

1. **Your King**, i.e. the king that suits you, is best fitted for you, the one God has chosen for you, in contrast to foreigners or usurpers who set themselves up over you. He is to be no foreign Alexander nor usurping Herod. Although the King would be God Himself come to rule (cf. Zech. 2:10; 8:3; 14:9), He would also be fully Hebrew (cf. Deut. 17:14f.).
2. He **comes to you** at some unspecified future date. He had not therefore appeared on the political scene of the world in Zechariah's time nor would necessarily appear shortly after Alexander the Great, even if after him. This promise intended to inspire hope in the Coming One. By John's time, "the Coming One" had been transformed into a Messianic title. (John 1:15, 27; 3:31; 6:14; 11:27; 12:13; cf. Matt. 11:3; 21:9 and parallels.) But Zechariah 2:10 promised the COMING OF JAHWEH to His people, so in some way the Messianic King must either be God incarnate or somehow possessed of the fulness of deity.
3. **Righteous**, or just. (Cf. Jer. 23:5; Acts 3:14.) This describes His personal character, His moral principles and His personal practice. (Cf. Deut. 17:18-20.) His royal administration would be conducted on the basis of true justice and uncorrupted righteousness. Truth stands at the foundation of everything He says or does. (Cf. John 14:6; Rev. 19:11.) Consequently, He qualifies to be the means for making others righteous before God. (Cf. Isa. 53:11; I Peter 3:18; 2:21-25.) Why Matthew omitted this expression of Zechariah is not clear.
4. **Having salvation** (ASV) is also omitted by our author. Because of an ambiguity in Hebrew, two meanings are possible:
 - a. "One who is saved." This is based on the passive rendering of the Nifal verb form. It is not unlikely that Matthew should omit

this phrase because a Messianic King who Himself needed saving would be unthinkable to the righteous, and Matthew did not desire at this point to explain how the Messiah could have been saved, if He was Himself to be the Savior of all others. After the resurrection, however, the Apostles could shout, "God raised Him from the dead!" Accordingly, Zechariah would mean that the Lord would render Him justice after His rejection by men, by restoring Him His rightful honor after He had shown Himself the suffering Servant of Jahweh. (Zech. 3:8; 11:8-14; 12:10; 13:7; Isa. 53:10-12; cf. John 17:5.)

- b. "Victorious." The RSV is not incorrect thus to render the Nifal form (*nosha'*), because Nifal, while often passive, is also reflexive or reciprocal. (Cf. Nakarai, *Biblical Hebrew*, 28, 32; Gesenius, *Lexicon*, 374 has "conqueror"; see Ps. 33:16.) Thus, this interpretation would be: "saving Himself," hence, "victorious."

5. **Humble** or **meek** translates *'ani*, rendered in Greek by *praüs* by Matthew and the LXX. Zechariah's word amplifies the Messiah's miserable condition, His lowliness as one afflicted, and His consequent mildness.

Although Keil (*Minor Prophets*, II, 334) may be right to note that *'ani* does not mean gentle, as if *praüs* were perfectly equivalent to the Hebrew word, because its primary sense is the humiliation of affliction, still there are numerous passages, like Psalm 68:10; Isaiah 41:17; 49:13; 51:21; 54:11 and Zephaniah 3:12, which speak of the nation of Israel from the point of view of its afflictions and low position. In such passages *'ani* gradually becomes equivalent to "the godly poor, the righteous who suffer, the godly servants of Jahweh who, however, are afflicted." This concept develops a moral and religious significance as these are distinguished as the people in whom faithfulness to Jahweh is maintained and spiritual religion developed. (*I.S.B.E.*, 2420b; cf. Num. 12:3; Ps. 10:12, 17f.; 22:26; 25:9; Prov. 3:34; 16:19; Isa. 29:19; 32:7; Zeph. 2:3.) Accordingly, Messiah embodies this character personally.

Therefore, the distinctively ethical flavor of *praüs* (Arndt-Gingrich, 705: "gentle, humble, considerate, meek, unassuming") may not be absent from the mind of Zechariah, especially as he describes the Messiah. Nevertheless, the affliction of material poverty is never far from the meaning-potential of the prophecy.

6. **Riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.** This expression is unquestionably intended to define more precisely the Messiah's characteristic meekness, since no reader need be informed that any ass ridden by the Messiah would be a **colt the foal of an ass**. In fact, every ass is the colt of an ass! Hebrew parallelism in Zechariah's poetry does not necessarily require this expression for fulness, since he could have written some other harmonious line to complete his thought. Rather, Zechariah chose this double definition of Messiah's meekness, because of the peculiar image these words convey. (See below on "Why Two Donkeys?") While it is true that donkeys are not so despised in countries where they are in common use, as they are elsewhere, they have never enjoyed the prestige of the horse. In fact, both Zechariah (LXX) and Matthew picturesquely describe the colt as a *hypozugion*, literally "under the yoke," hence "a draft animal, beast of burden, pack animal," (Arndt-Gingrich, 852).

Horses have ever been the animal most prized for its strength, agility and speed. (Cf. Zech. 1:8; 6:1-7; 9:10; 10:3, 5; 12:4; 14:20.) Nevertheless, asses were used in war along with horses, mules and camels (Zech. 14:15). They were considered valuable property among wealthy people (Gen. 12:16; 22:3; 30:43; Job 42:12; I Chron. 27:30; I Sam. 9:3ff.). Although asses were a beast of burden in common use (cf. Isa. 1:3; I Chron. 12:40; more numerous than horses, mules and camels after the exile, Ezra 2:64ff.), even as in earlier times when Israel as yet possessed no horses, so they also remained in common use for riding even after Solomon's time. (Cf. Judg. 10:4; 12:14; II Sam. 17:23; 19:26; I Kings 2:40; 13:13-29; II Kings 4:24.)

Solomon's great interest in horses, however, underlines their supposed all-round superiority to donkeys and helps to explain why God prohibited Israel from depending upon horses for tactical military superiority. (Cf. Deut. 17:16 with II Kings 10:26-29; II Chron. 9:24f.) Horses may be appropriate symbols of war, but it does not necessarily follow that donkeys are symbols of peace. The donkey, as will be shown, may be rather the symbol of the common life as opposed to the prestigious one. It is only as the humility of the Messiah is seen in His riding an ass that His peace is seen. Peace is in the total prophecy, not in the donkey! *Meek*, in context, says: "Peaceful."

Rather than foster materialistic hopes, Zechariah clearly warned that God's Messianic King would not ride in triumph on a fiery-eyed Egyptian battle horse or in an imperial chariot, like an Alexander. Nor would He initiate a reign of arrogant cruelty, like that of a Herod or a Jewish Nero. More surprisingly than that, this divine King would not even appear to Israel on the clouds of heaven! Instead, like the common man of all times, He would appear as a peaceful citizen, riding a common, unimpressive beast of burden.

Josephus (*Contra Apion*, II, 7) thought of donkeys this way: "Asses are the same with us which they are with other wise men, viz. creatures that bear the burdens which we lay upon them; but if they come to our threshing-floors and eat our corn, or do not perform what we impose upon them, we beat them with a great many stripes; because it is their business to minister to us in our husbandry affairs." This was said in contrast to Egyptians who do honor to crocodiles and asps.

Zechariah's point of comparison is the more striking when it is observed how he emphasizes the total absence of any dependence upon the war chariots and horses upon which worldly kingdoms count so heavily for their power (Zech. 9:10). This very contrast between proud generals mounted upon richly decorated horses with flashing, ornamental harnesses and saddles, armed with battle bows and leading hordes of war chariots and on the one hand, and, on the other, the Messianic King, quietly riding unarmed into the City of God, mounted on a common donkey, unsaddled except for someone's robe tossed over its back, serves to deflate all nationalistic dreams of earthly power and exaltation connected with Jesus of Nazareth! He depicts a Kingdom that would not be established by a power struggle, nor would it depend upon worldly might for its stability. Any reader of Zechariah should conclude that, if the Messiah is to reign at all, especially over a worldwide dominion, He must gain this control by quite unworldly means. If not by tyrannical use of authority, He must conquer men's hearts by the persuasive force of His moral leadership, by the convincing power of His revealed truth and by the example of His humble service.

Matthew's style of quotation is perfect: not too much and not too little. Had he quoted Zechariah's next verse: "I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off," he might have prematurely turned off the

pro-Zealot sympathizers among his readers, because of the evident non-violent approach predicated of Israel's Messiah. Had he quoted the following portion, "and he shall command peace to the nations," he might have unnecessarily enflamed the Gentile-hating reactions of nationalistic conservatives. And by not quoting the final portion, "his dominion shall be from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth," he did not excite futile hopes of a materialistic messianic kingdom. His citation focuses on the spiritual details just enough to spur his readers both to reread the ancient prophets and re-examine the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth in order that they might be smitten by the remarkable resemblance between the prediction and the fulfilment and be persuaded to surrender to Him.

In the same way Matthew did not cite all of Zechariah's words, Jesus did not personally or literally act out all of the prophet's message either. He did not instantly nor publicly eliminate the use of military to promote His kingdom (Zech. 9:10), even if He later refused Peter's offer to defend Him with the sword (Matt. 26:52) and affirmed the spiritual character of His reign before Pilate (John 18:36). Nor did He then and there proclaim peace to the Gentile nations (Zech. 9:10), and it has taken centuries for His dominion to be spread over the earth in world missionary movements. It is clear, then, that Jesus meant to draw attention to Himself in this vivid way which recalls the total prophecy of Zechariah, so that the thoughtful might examine the total Jesus-phenomenon in the light of the prophet's predictions, and conclude that Jesus of Nazareth was all that the prophet had pictured and more too. In fact, peace was proclaimed to the nations later. (Cf. Eph. 2:17; Acts 2:39.) Military might has also been eliminated as a means to advance His kingdom, because evangelism and patient teaching are the only methods permitted (Matt. 28:19f.; Mark 16:15f.; Luke 24:47; John 20:21ff., 30f.; Acts 1:8). Rather, His Royal Entry into Jerusalem perfectly harmonized with Jesus' earlier teaching in that He did not destroy His enemies by making political use of the opportunity and power unquestionably within His reach by virtue of His popular support and His miracle-working power. Rather, He pursued His usual course of quiet teaching and humble service even to the most undeserving.

This is come to pass that it might be fulfilled. The Lord Jesus had always intended to enter Jerusalem in precisely this manner, so He inspired Zechariah to announce that He would. Now He merely moved into human history to carry out what He said He would and in perfect harmony with the proper interpretation of His own prophecy.

As on so many other occasions (cf. John 2:22; 20:9), the disciples did not instantly catch the overriding theological significance of the Messianic Entry as this is expressed in Zechariah's prophetic statement (cf. John 12:14-16), until the light of His resurrection glory illuminated and explained His mighty acts in their proper perspective. (Cf. Luke 24:44ff.; John 14:26; 7:39.)

WHY TWO DONKEYS?

Matthew has been accused of misreading Zechariah's prophecy by seeing two donkeys there, and then of adding another donkey to this scene to make it agree with his misunderstanding of the prophecy. This arises out of the word "and" in the expression: "riding upon a donkey AND upon a colt the foal of a beast of burden." Matthew supposedly mistook the "donkey" and the "colt" for two animals, and against the testimony of the other Evangelists, gratuitously introduced another female donkey into his record to cover up the apparent discrepancy between Jesus' triumphal entry with only one donkey (as recorded by Mark, Luke and John), and Zechariah's prophecy as he understood it.

The critics are correct to point out that "and" does not always serve to link two distinct objects. Gesenius (*Lexicon*, 234) could be cited to show that the Hebrew *vav* ("and") is also used:

(b) to connect nouns, the second of which depends upon the first as though in the genitive (hendiadys) . . . (c) inserted by way of explanation between words in apposition. . . . Sometimes two nouns are joined together by *vav*, the former of which denotes genus, the latter species, or at least the latter is also contained in the former, so that one might say, *and specially*, and particularly, and namely.

Thus, our sentence would read: "Meek and riding upon an ass, and specifically upon an ass colt, the male foal of she-asses" (Zechariah in Hebrew).

As might be expected of Greek-speaking Jews, the LXX and NT Greek reflect the same usage. Arndt-Gingrich (393) note that *kai* ("and") is often "explicative; i.e. a word or clause is connected by means of *kai* with another word or clause, for the purpose of explaining what goes before it . . . *that is, namely, and indeed, and at that.*" Thus our sentence would read: "Gentle and mounted upon a beast

of burden, that is, upon a young colt," (Zechariah in LXX) or "Gentle and mounted upon an ass, and upon a colt at that, the foal of a beast of burden" (Matthew).

Thus, the ancient prophet intended to point out a fact as surprisingly noteworthy, because it stood in striking contrast to the usual style of all other world conquerors. Filled with incredulous wonder, Zechariah exclaimed: "Note, your king is coming to you: humble and mounted on an ass, and on a colt at that, the foal of asses!"

But Matthew is Hebrew enough to recognize idioms in his own language better than his distant critics. In fact, while the above argumentation is valid, it is the critics who fail to see the TWO ASSES IN ZECHARIAH! Any careful reading of Zechariah in Hebrew will show that there really are two asses: the male ass (*chamor*) on which the King was to ride, and the female ass (*athon*), mother of the former. Nothing is said in Zechariah about the King's riding upon both animals. All that is affirmed is that he will ride upon the male ass-colt.

It appears, therefore, that our Lord requested that both animals be brought in order better to emphasize His intention to fulfil Zechariah's prophecy. Thus, that unmounted she-ass in the Messianic Procession was not extra at all. Because she came along beside her colt mounted by Jesus, her otherwise unexplained presence draws attention to the fact that the colt ridden by Zion's King is truly a "colt, the foal of she-asses." By re-enacting everything in Zechariah's prophecy down to the fine detail of including the seemingly unnecessary she-ass in the picture, Jesus intended to focus public attention on the prophecy. And yet everything took place so naturally that the disciples did not immediately see the connection between Jesus' actions and the prophecy. This came upon later reflection, but Jesus had laid the groundwork for their understanding (cf. John 12:16).

Why, then, did Matthew report two donkeys, when his colleagues report only one? Matthew objectively counted both of them, because there were two to be counted! The other Evangelists characteristically singled out the donkey most important for their report, i.e. the one Jesus actually rode, without mentioning the colt's dam or denying her presence in the parade that day. The former publican can hardly be criticized for his continued careful attention to numbers, even after his call to Apostleship! (Other examples of this procedure: two demoniacs, Matt. 8:28 = Mark 5:2 = Luke 8:27; two blind men, Matt. 20:30 = Mark 10:46 = Luke 18:35.) In fact, Mark and Luke do not quote Zechariah's prophecy and John shortens it, leaving

out Zechariah's mention of the colt's mother, so they would not need to mention two animals.

21:6 And the disciples went, and did even as Jesus appointed them, because "they found it as he had told them" (Luke 19:32) **7 and brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their garments; and he sat thereon.** Although Jesus could really ride only one animal, nevertheless, because the Lord had not yet indicated which He intended to mount, the men prepared both for the procession. However, it does not follow that Jesus mounted both the colt AND the older donkey, as some commentators attempt to force Matthew to say. Because He wrote: "they brought the ass and the colt and put their clothes on them and he sat on them (*kaì epétheikan ep' autôn tà himàtia, kaì epekàthisen epàno autôn*), it is thought that the plural *autôn* ("them") refers to "donkeys" in both cases. The last *autôn*, however, refers to the near antecedent, i.e. the *garments* placed upon the donkeys. The pronoun's antecedent is normally the noun which is mentioned closest in the near context, unless other reasons prevail. In our case, the other interpretation would create the absurdity of seeing Jesus try to sit astraddle of two donkeys contemporaneously.

Their garments were the long, outer robe that served the purpose of overcoat. (See note on 5:40; cf. Exod. 22:26f.) Since the unbroken colt would not be saddled, Jesus' men, instantly and without a thought for self, whipped off their own robes—the best that they had for Passover—to create a makeshift saddle blanket for Him. *He sat thereon*: Luke mentions how the disciples assisted Jesus in seating Himself comfortably on His mount.

Plummer (*Matthew*, 286) is mistaken to write: "There seems to be no example of *epàno* being used as riding on an animal; it would perhaps be as unusual as for us to talk of riding 'on the top of' a horse." While he may be correct with regard to "riding" as such, Matthew did not say, "he rode thereon," but "he SAT thereon" (*kaì epekàthisen epàno autôn*). And THIS idiom is well documented (Matt. 23:22; 28:2; Rev. 6:8; cf. other passages where there is implied a similar contact between one object and another placed on top of it: Matt. 5:14; 23:18, 20; Rev. 20:3). Plummer simply failed to see that the procession had not yet started and that Jesus had merely mounted the donkey.

How long it took the disciples to go and return with the animals is not stated. However, we must not imagine the Royal Entry into

Jerusalem as occurring in one morning's time, because Mark informs us that when Jesus finally arrived in the temple, "it was already late" (Mark 11:11). Further, John's account (12:12f.) implies enough time on this day for a great crowd in Jerusalem to hear of Jesus' coming and to go to meet Him as He arrived over Olivet's brow.

21:8 And the most part of the multitude: where did all these people come from? The Synoptics are surprisingly brief here, since suddenly, almost miraculously out of nowhere, people not only begin milling around Jesus and shouting Messianic slogans, but launch a demonstration so portentous that not only are the jealous Pharisees deeply shaken (John 12:19) and impotent to stop it (Luke 19:37-40), but also the entire city of Jerusalem is eventually stirred (Matt. 21:10). It is John (12:12f., 17f.) who provides the explanations:

1. The multitude consisted of pilgrims "who had come to the feast" (John 12:12). They are already people "on the move" in Jerusalem, hence relatively free to flow to points of interest. These "heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem," (John 12:12b). How they heard is not stated, although it is not impossible that Jesus had already announced His intention to make such an entry into the city on Sunday morning. These rumors must have been spread through the Capital by excited Galilean pilgrims who had travelled with the Lord and had gone on into the city earlier.
2. Even some Jerusalemites who had been present in Bethany's cemetery to console Martha and Mary concerning their brother Lazarus (cf. John 11:18f., 31, 45f.), bore witness to Jesus, because they had witnessed Lazarus' resurrection (John 12:17f.). This too swelled the crowd now standing to meet Jesus.

The fact that the Synoptics omit this rich information may indicate that the Triumphal Entry had become a fact so well-known by the time of its documentation, that no explanation of the crowds' presence was thought essential to communicate the basic story. So we must picture a convergence of two streams of people on the Mount of Olives, the larger one approaching from Jerusalem, the other flowing along beside Jesus coming from Bethany. Some estimate of the magnitude of this demonstration may be had by remembering the census taken when Cestius was governor during the time of Nero, at which time it was learned that more than two and a half million Jews were present at that later Passover (Josephus, *Wars*, VI,9,3). If we arbitrarily deduct from the population of Jerusalem and reduce

the remainder by three-fourths, the remaining throng of people ready to acclaim Jesus is no small crowd! But it was *the multitudes*, not the authorities in Israel, who joined in this happy occasion. Only the common people praised Jesus, a rather common occurrence throughout Jesus' ministry. (Cf. Mark 11:18; 12:37; Luke 18:43; 19:48; 21:38; 8:40; 13:17.) Just a few, omnipresent, grouchy Pharisees stood around criticizing. Remarkable for their conspicuous absence are the political heads, the religious hierarchy and the military. This is the day of the lower, middle class and the poor, the unarmed, the unlearned, the unappreciated masses.

The multitude spread their garments on the way, a gesture to show royal honor to Jesus. (Cf. II Kings 9:13.) In this, they followed the example of the disciples who sacrificed their own outer garment to drape it over the donkeys. Feel the infectious enthusiasm that motivated these generous well-wishers to carpet Jesus' path with their best outer robes worn to the Passover. No waving banners, no battle flags, no velvet carpet: just the homespun cloth of common people. Love is mother of inventive ways of showing this high honor and lowly submission. **Others cut branches from the trees and spread them in the way.** Back in Nehemiah's time (Neh. 8:15), people were ordered to "go out to the hill and bring" such branches as were needed for making the typical booths for the Feast of Tabernacles. Perhaps the trees were considered public domain for precisely this purpose.

Grand processions of this same nature had been organized to greet Alexander the Great (Josephus, *Antiquities*, XI,8,5). But is there any special significance in the choice of palm branches carried by many in the multitude (John 12:13) or that others, finding themselves no more palms, also **cut branches from the trees** (Matthew) to spread their leafy branches on the road ahead of Jesus?

1. A mixture of palm branches and those from leafy trees combined with fruit of goodly trees and willows of the brook was symbolic of the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:39-43; cf. Rev. 7:9, 13-17, esp. v. 15 *skendsei*). Since Matthew does not specify which trees furnished branches, this cannot be conclusive against identification of the idea in the minds of the well-wishers celebrating Jesus' entry.
2. When Judas Maccabeus led Israel in rededicating the Temple (the first Feast of Dedication, cf. John 10:22), they "celebrated it for eight days with rejoicing in the manner of the

feast of booths, they had been wandering in the mountains and caves like wild animals. Therefore bearing ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also fronds of palm, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to him who had given success to the purifying of his own holy place." (II Macc. 10:6f. However, this detail is not mentioned in I Macc. 4:36-51.)

3. Simon Maccabeus' cleansing of the Citadel was celebrated with a procession of Jews bearing palm branches and singing as they went (I Macc. 13:50-52).

Can it be that, for the Israelites, these branches represented a symbol of triumph over their enemies? Or are they just part of the usual scenario appropriate for offering homage to a triumphant leader? (Cf. Edersheim, *Life*, II, 372.) In the light of the above references, is it not likely that the transferring of some of the symbolism of the Feast of Tabernacles is the work, not of our Evangelists, as some assert, but of the people? If the zealous puritans who purified the Temple and Citadel saw nothing inappropriate about Psalm-singing and tree branches as an expression of special joy granted them by God, why should not this Passover crowd greet Jesus in precisely the same way and for the same reasons? Nevertheless, the SPIRIT of the Feast of Booths permeates the present demonstration. Admittedly the people's actions do not indicate a full consciousness of Jesus' Messiahship as His disciples later came to understand this (John 12:14-16), but who can affirm with certainty that these excited people did not desire to proclaim the typical meaning of the Feast of Booths? Hailing Jesus as the Christ (King of Israel and Son of David), it is not impossible nor unlikely that these crowds, in their longing for the permanent restoration of all things, should have desired to express themselves in terms of the Feast of Booths. This is not contradicted by the fact that it was Passover, because, if they hoped that the Messiah would bring in a new era, entirely different from all that went before, Passover could be forgotten, lost in the permanent joy of eternal peace!

Nevertheless, the more certainly it can be determined that the multitudes intended to communicate something of the Tabernacles festal spirit, the more wrong-headed they appear. In fact, they would have confused the Messiah's first coming for His second, the sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb for the joyous feast of booths at year's end, the cross for the eternal kingdom.

If the Tabernacles flavor should be thought important for our understanding of Matthew, why did not Matthew make it explicit as he writes for Jews?

1. By referring to what Zechariah had written concerning the Messiah, he spoke of it indirectly. (Cf. Zech. 14:16-19.)
2. By simply narrating the event objectively, Matthew spoke volumes to any Jew who, sensitive to the history of his people and to his own experience of worship at the great feasts, would recognize, in the facts narrated, the high symbolism intended by the crowds.

21:9 **And the multitudes that went before him, and that followed** . . . are definitely two groups. The former (*hoi dè ochloi hoi proàgontes autòn*) are probably those whom John mentions as coming from Jerusalem to meet Jesus (John 12:12f.). Turning as they meet Him coming over the hill, they become the vanguard moving at the front of the procession. Luke (19:37f.) connects this dramatic moment with Jesus' arrival at the summit of the Mount of Olives where the descent begins. At precisely this moment "the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen." (See Paraphrase/Harmony.) A futile attempt by some Pharisees to silence this popular enthusiasm is itself squelched by Jesus' famous rebuttal: "If these were silent, the very stones would cry out!" (Luke 19:40). It may well have been in this very connection that frustrated colleagues of those who remonstrated with Jesus, now dissuade them from further, useless attempts: "You see that you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him" (John 12:19). This bitter Pharisean confession, while admittedly exaggerated, provides some estimate of the magnitude of this mass rally. Certainly, THEIR world had gone after Him, since the Pharisees normally had the common people in the palm of their hand (*Antiquities*, XIII,10,5,6). But now these are mobilizing around these bigots' latest, most serious Rival.

But Jesus' thoughts were disturbed by something other than His supposedly universal popularity indicated in the frustrated Pharisees' unintended praise (Luke 19:41-44). When, at a bend in the road or after crossing a last ridge of the mountain, Jerusalem came into full view, Jesus no longer heard the happy shouting, no longer saw the masses milling around Him. He could only weep as He clearly fore-saw the final tragic end of what had been so dear to Him, the city

of the Great King, its inhabitants and its Temple. He wept, because neither Israel nor Jerusalem had recognized Who it was that had visited them. Not only was earth now a "visited planet," but God Himself, in the person of His Son, had now visited His nation, His city and would soon visit His house, the Temple, for the last time before its final fall. He was the only person that day who understood the real issues, and His sobs, seemingly so out of place amidst the well-nigh universal rejoicing around Him, proved far more realistic than did the hosannas. He understood what His coming could have granted to the nation, but this did not blind Him to the real punishment hanging over the people who turned a deaf ear to His offers.

Hosanna to the Son of David. The word *Hosanna* is the Greek form of the Hebrew expression *Hoshiah nah*, which originally indicated a liturgical appeal to God: "Help" or "Save, I pray." This crowd seems to be using it more loosely, in the sense of "Give victory to the Son of David!" (Cf. "God save the King!" Ps. 20:9 = LXX 19:10; see Gesenius, 374.) Although *Hosanna* originally meant "O save!" the fulness of salvation is life unbroken by death. Consequently, *Hosanna* became equivalent to "Live for ever!" It was an easy step to broaden its restricted usage to express hearty best wishes, a sort of holy hurray, mingling approval, admiration and highest good feelings toward the person thus addressed. Nevertheless, the extent to which those Hebrews' shout appealed to the Nazarene for the nation's salvation is the extent to which Jesus' enemies must have been infuriated. To hear the Nazarene claimant to Messiahship so addressed constituted a far more serious scandal in the leaders' thinking than merely to shout a comparatively harmless and complimentary Psalm of praise to welcome Him into Jerusalem. Who is HE to be able to "save" Israel?! Did the crowds have in mind the Messianic Psalm 118? To a Hebrew ear, there is practically no difference between Matthew 21:9b, c and the first lines of Psalm 118:25, 26, with the single addition of "to the Son of David," which is a perfectly natural paraphrase for "Messiah."

How the other Evangelists inflect this basic quotation is also instructive. Whereas Mark, Luke and John unitedly cite "Blessed (be) He who comes in the name of the Lord," rather than explain the Jewish expression "Son of David" (Messianic King), they spell it out: "even the King of Israel" (John 12:13), "the coming kingdom of our father, David," (Mark 11:10) or simply "the king" (Luke 19:39). On *Son of David*, see notes on 1:1, 20; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30.

He who comes in the name of the Lord, in Psalm 118:26 could refer to ANY worshipper of God arriving at Jerusalem. In fact, Edersheim (*Life*, II,368) notes that, according to Jewish tradition, Psalm 118:25-28 was commonly chanted antiphonally by the people of Jerusalem as they went to welcome the arriving pilgrims (Midrash Tehilim on Psalm 118; cf. Flusser, *Jesus*, 150). But how much more applicable is this expression to the Anointed of God who comes! Significantly, the following line from Psalm 118:26 affirms: "We bless you from the house of the Lord." Shortly thereafter the Lord suddenly came to His temple (cf. Mal. 3:1). As will be noted later, Psalm 118:22f. is to be understood in a Messianic sense. (Cf. Matt. 21:42 = Mark 12:10 = Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11f.; I Peter 2:7.)

Hosanna in the highest! If "hosanna" means "give victory" (cf. Rev. 7:9f.), then they may be praying God's blessing on Jesus, seeking for Him the highest possible victory, not merely God's help to win over earthly enemies, but the conquest of the principalities and powers throughout the universe. (Cf. Ps. 148:1c.) Luke (19:38b) paraphrases this lovely prayer: "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" (Cf. Luke 2:14.) May Messiah's reign over the universe bring peace and glory!

How is it that so many people could rise so spontaneously and so ecstatically to this occasion?

1. This was the Passover season with its commemoration of the redemption of Israel from the slavery of Egypt. The Egyptian bondage would remind them of the Roman occupation. This, in turn, would call for prayer for liberation from this latest bondage. Although the crowds would assume that liberation from Rome must come through military might, their very deliverance from Egypt was an act of totally divine omnipotence, unaided by human intervention. God could do it again!
2. The worship of the pilgrims approaching Jerusalem was begun as they neared the city, chanting Psalms, and their celebration of God's redemptive power continued as they sang Psalms 113-118 during the feast. Since the Hebrew people knew the words of this great poetry by heart and were accustomed to singing it together, it is no more amazing that they should break forth in well-known songs of praise than for a group of Christians to use some well-known Christian hymn to proclaim their praise. The surprise of this scenario does not consist in singing what they already knew, but in directing this praise to Jesus.

3. Jesus' multitude of disciples had well-founded reason to rejoice and praise God "for all the mighty works that they had seen" (Luke 19:37), because these miracles evidenced the presence of One in their midst who could bring their long-cherished hopes to reality. Further, the stupendous miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead had stirred the admiration of almost everyone who learned of "this sign" of Jesus' power and identity (John 12:17f.).
4. Psychologically, who could NOT rejoice that God's redemption of His people, so long-awaited, is about to take place in one's own generation?
 - a. In fact, if Jesus IS the Messiah they think He is going to be, God's great, eternal Feast of Booths is about to begin. (See note on 21:8.)
 - b. The crowds' emphasis on the Davidic Kingdom (Mark 11:10; Luke 19:38; John 12:13) accurately summarizes the popular impression "that the Kingdom of God was shortly to appear" (Luke 19:11).
 - c. Since they had endured poverty and enslavement for centuries and sustained the waiting for their Messiah to bring them unparalleled prosperity, no wonder their enthusiasm exploded in jubilant singing, when they believed that their economic woes were now to be over! National independence was within reach! It was an extraordinary, unforgettable moment in Israel's history: a day-long, palm-branch-wrapped outpouring of national pride, patriotism and joy—millions of fellow Hebrews feeling together, laughing together, praying together, crying and rejoicing together.
5. McGarvey (*Fourfold Gospel*, 575) notes that the Messianic cheering began largely with the crowd coming out from Jerusalem to meet Jesus. Therefore, "the apostles who were approaching the city with Jesus had nothing to do with inciting this praise." And yet, while they may not have initiated it, they could very well have coordinated and continued it. After all, their own views of Jesus' mission were almost perfect copies of the popular views.
6. People recognized in Jesus a regal glory greater than all else on earth:
 - a. They remembered His supernatural power superior to all that the great of earth could ever possess.
 - b. They recalled His undoubtedly prophetic teaching "as one who possesses authority, not like the scribes."
 - c. They were in love with His matchless character so much like God.

- d. They had begun to appreciate Him as the promised Christ, the fulfiller of their Bible's prophecies.
 - e. By faith they had caught a glimpse of the foundational reality which this event portrayed. The fact that our Lord welcomed their unabashed adoration merely served to stabilize and fortify their confidence in Him and belief in that reality.
7. The people more closely associated with Jesus are completely open to a "triumphal entry." It seemed that the hour for the manifestation of His royalty, so long desired by His mother (John 2:4), demanded by His brothers (John 7:4) and dreamed of by His followers (Matt. 20:21; Luke 19:11; cf. Acts 1:6), was about to strike. All that was lacking to release their restrained impatience and free their enthusiasm was a signal from Jesus. In fact, all their present exhilaration now completely justified His earlier Messianic reserve. (See notes on 16:20; 14:22; 17:9.)

If so many reasons seem excessive to explain the crowd's enthusiasm, let it be remembered that it is with a CROWD that we are dealing, a vast concourse of milling, wondering single individuals with quite varied reasons for what each does. None of those present were motivated by just one reason. Many were undoubtedly stirred by conflicting reasons. Yet, for the most part, they thought they were really praising God by welcoming Jesus in this way (Luke 19:37). This explains why Jesus could accept their unashamed praise and identify with their enthusiasm, however poorly they truly understood Him and His mission. He accepted their holy enthusiasm and spiritual joy.

Lest the majority of these well-wishers be maligned by picturing them as readily swaying one day from high Messianic fervor toward Jesus, to bitter, determined opposition to Him on another,—one day singing "Hosanna," another day angrily bawling, "Crucify Him!"—let us recall several facts:

- 1. John 12:12f., 17f. clearly identifies this crowd as made up largely of disciples and sympathizers friendly to Jesus.
- 2. Even the Pharisees on location credit the multitude with being largely composed of "your disciples" (Luke 19:39).
- 3. Matthew seems to trace a contrast between "Jerusalem" and "the crowds" (Matt. 21:10f.).
- 4. The rulers could not count on popular support for their assassination of Jesus, and the blow must necessarily be dealt "by stealth . . . not during the feast lest there be a tumult among the people"

(Matt. 26:3-5 and par.). The presence of Jesus' supporters among pilgrims at the feast posed a serious hindrance to the authorities' freedom to act (cf. Matt. 21:26; Mark 12:12).

5. Although Peter, addressing a mixed audience of pilgrims and local citizenry, accuses them all generally (Acts 2:14, 23, 36; 3:14, 17), it is significant that Paul, when addressing Hebrews of the Diaspora, specifically accuses the dwellers of Jerusalem and their rulers (Acts 13:26f.). The difference is that Peter was addressing more directly the murderers mixed among the various listeners, while Paul was singling out those materially responsible for Christ's murder. Cleopas makes this same distinction (Luke 24:19f.).
6. Edersheim (*Life*, II,371) also distinguishes the leaders and people:

The very suddenness and completeness of the blow, which the Jewish authorities delivered, would have stunned even those who had deeper knowledge, more cohesion and greater independence than most of them who, on that Palm-Sunday, had gone forth from the City.

Thus, the majority of people did not sway from "Hosanna" to "Crucify Him!" Rather, they lamented Jesus' fate (Luke 24:19f.). This, of course, is not to say that absolutely no one wavered. In fact, if anyone swayed from unmitigated admiration of Jesus to bitter resentment and readiness to crucify Him, it would be because Jesus had disappointed him by not bringing in the expected Kingdom. (Remember 11:2-6. Judas Iscariot may be a sad case in point.) Wrong expectations concerning Jesus' Messianic program could not help but set people up for a letdown. If they hoped He would instantly set up the Kingdom and rule from Jerusalem on David's throne, realize national ambitions of glory and independence, then this very expectation, when disappointed, psychologically prepared them to turn against Jesus when they saw Him the apparently helpless prisoner of the very Romans He should have been most ruthlessly ready to eliminate. Shaken by His steadfast refusal to use His power to defend Himself and their cause, dazed at His continuing to promote purely ethical ends, stunned by the consequences of being found on the losing side when Jesus permitted Himself to be beaten by the hierarchy, those who were fundamentally undecided earlier could easily swing over to the opposition. But even then, it is to be doubted how many would be so ready to sell out to His enemies when there was hope Jesus might yet act, that is, until Thursday night of the Passover week.

Even so, how many of those who shouted "Hosanna" were even physically present when, early Friday morning, Pilate presented Jesus to a crowd of people for a final decision (Luke 23:4, 13; Matt. 27:20-25)? Since these were specially primed and prompted to request Barabbas and destroy Jesus, is it even likely that His enemies would have permitted into the judgment area anyone who could raise a dissenting voice at the critical moment in the hearing of Pilate on whose final decision everything depended? No, it appears that the multitude favorable to Jesus succeeded in gathering only after His condemnation. (See Luke 23:27, 35, 48f.)

The point is that we are discussing the separate motives of approximately two and a half million people, some of whom are bitterly jealous of Jesus, others who are ardently admirers but not decidedly disciples, others who are curiosity seekers, others who are profoundly committed to Him, others who are nervously plotting His assassination, others who are "going along for the ride." So, why not let the majority of the Triumphal Entry crowd be thought of as sincere and steadfast to the end of Jesus' crucifixion?

21:10 And when he was come into Jerusalem, all the city was stirred. The cheering could have been heard in the city while the procession was yet beginning the descent of Olivet, causing the inhabitants of Jerusalem to turn their gaze toward that mount 70 meters higher than the temple area. Although Jesus was not unknown in Jerusalem (cf. John 2:13-24; 5:1-47; 7-10:39), no Jerusalemite could have dreamed that He would dare stage a Messianic demonstration on this scale, entering the city accompanied by a throng shouting Messianic slogans.

While the expression, *all the city*, may refer not only to the city's usual population but also to the tens of thousands of Passover pilgrims arrived from all over the Roman Empire (cf. the representative samples present on Pentecost just 50 days later: Acts 2:5-11), it is evident from Matthew's antithesis cast between "all the city" (here) and "the crowds" (v. 11), that there is a contrast between the Jerusalemites and the pilgrims. The local citizens evidenced a certain coldness to Jesus. After all Jesus had done in Palestine, after all the "wanted notices" had been circulating (John 11:57), if they still had to ask "*Who is this?*" rather than "*What is going on?*" they were insensitive to Jesus!

While scholars have pointed out the specific interest of Luke in Jerusalem as the City of God that rejected the Son of God, this

emphasis, somewhat less evident, is present in Matthew also. Whereas *all the city was stirred* to ask, *Who is this?* it was untroubled to seek the proper answer to its own question and act on it. It was satisfied to take the lowest possible view of the common evaluation (v. 11). Even as at Jesus' birth (Matt. 2:3), when Jerusalem was shaken (*etaràchthe*) by the disturbing questions of the Magi, so also now she is shaken (*eseìsthe*) by the new reality emphasized by the shouting crowds. But in neither case is there any evidence that Jerusalem took the trouble to examine more than superficially the momentous significance of the events that caused the foreigner tourists within her gates to sing so joyfully.

Who is this? is not so much a question for information (cf. John 9:36) as it is a challenge, half-alarmed and half-contemptuous. Matthew's choice to report this question may have several ramifications:

1. Jesus is not walking into just any city in the world. He has now *come into Jerusalem*. This city was not merely the center of religious and political life in Israel. Rather, it symbolized the sense of Israel's history and importance in the scheme of God. (Study Zechariah's references to Jerusalem in their context: 1:12, 14, 16, 17; 2:2, 4, 12; 3:2; 8:4, 8, 22; 9:9, 10; 12:2-11; 13:1; 14:2, 4, 8, 10-12, 14, 16f., 21. Note also his references to "Zion, House of God, Temple.") How will Jerusalem react to Him? is a question on the mind of Jewish readers. As with "the Jews," in John's language, so Jerusalem too became a symbol of the opposition to Jesus. (Cf. 23:37ff.).
2. For a Hebrew, "to go up to Jerusalem" had a religious meaning, but, for Jesus, it is much more. He is going up there in the name of God to take possession of all that finds its fulfillment in Him. Because He had come to be sacrificed for the world's sins, He did it in the most public way appropriate: He came in His nation's capital at the most significant feast of the year to die as God's Passover Lamb while the nation was assembled to witness it.
3. Thus, Matthew's choice to record this one succinct question inexorably guides the reader. It is as if he were asking: "Dear reader, even as the city asked, so now you too must answer on the basis of all you have seen of this Man: *who is this?*"

21:11 And the multitudes said, This is the prophet, Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee. There can be no surprise that ignorant people should provide such a grossly limited evaluation of our Lord, i.e. was

He no more to them than merely *the prophet*?! Our surprise arises, rather, from the fact that Matthew himself just leaves this answer uncorrected on the lips of the crowds. Is not Jesus so much more?! But, argues Matthew, let men ponder the glorious truth that, after 400 years of Heaven's silence in which no true prophet ever arose in Israel, God has finally sent to His people, not only John the Baptist, but *THE Prophet* (*ho profètes*).

Cf. Mark 6:15; Luke 7:16; 24:19; John 1:21, 25; 6:14; 7:40; 9:17. Although John 1:21, 25 indicates confusion among some Jews about identifying "the Christ" with "the Prophet," since it is evident that some did not consider them as perfectly synonymous, nevertheless John 6:14 and 7:40 indicate that others saw these as more nearly synonymous terms.

It was the Galileans who first identified Jesus as "the Prophet who is to come into the world!" (John 6:14; cf. Luke 7:16). Others too—even Samaritans—had been willing to acknowledge His prophetic office. (Cf. Matt. 16:14; Luke 9:8, 19; John 4:19; 7:4; 9:17.) Even after this, this same popular view protected Jesus (Matt. 21:46). Both Peter (Acts 3:22f.) and Stephen (Acts 7:37) considered the famous "prophet" prediction of Moses (Deut. 18:15ff.) to have real, persuasive power in identifying Jesus as the promised *prophet*. Thus, Matthew has good reason to draw attention to the fact that this *Prophet* holds sway over men, not by the threat of His sceptre, but through the divine power and authority of His teaching. Let the reader examine the Nazarene's credentials to see whether He be a Teacher come from God or not. If so, let him hear Him and submit to Him! If not, He deserved to be crucified!

As an answer to the monumentally dumb question, "Who is this?" the name *Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee*, bears the ring of Galilean pride as His compatriots name His hometown. Nevertheless, we must not forget the scandal of a Nazarene Christ. He is but a mere provincial, whose despised background was cause for raised eyebrows and harsh words in the Council (John 7:45-52). But, best of all, this lowly background was subject of ancient prophecies! (See notes on 2:23 and 4:12-17.)

While their confession of *Jesus (as) the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee* is undoubtedly the understatement of the century, because HE is so far much more than this, still it must be interpreted in the larger context of the same crowd's Messianic salutations expressed during

the procession. Must we not admit that Peter's Pentecostal accusations, that Israel had murdered God's Christ, had far more clout with his audience, precisely because of this earlier public recognition of Jesus as God's *Prophet*? (See Acts 2:22f., 36; 3:13f.) Certainly, there were some fickle people in this host, who, caught up in the excitement, took up a half-believed cry as their impulse led. But Matthew remembers that those who called Jesus *the prophet*, had also called Him "Son of David . . . He who comes in the name of the Lord!" (v. 9).

THE POINT OF THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

The point of the Triumphal Entry pageant must be judged, as any other triumph, on the basis of its component parts, its protagonists, its goals.

WHAT THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY IS NOT

Jesus was not Himself caught up in the popular enthusiasm for His Messiahship. Not even momentarily was He deceived into thinking that people would welcome Him as Messiah totally on His own terms. His weeping over Jerusalem in the midst of the shouting crowds (Luke 19:41ff.) can have no other significance than His unrelenting dedication to the purpose of God, even if it cost Him the loss of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple and the exile of the majority of His kinsmen. Although some would view His weeping as evidence of human weakness, we must see His tears as underlining His sober realism in the presence of facts that broke the heart of God.

Gentiles, had they witnessed this provincial procession characterized by the lusty, honest celebration of common people, would never have dignified it with the title of "triumph." Rather, they would have smiled at any reference to this event in terms of the ambitious displays of victory and glory which the powerful of this world enjoy after their successful aggressions. Notable for its absence was a display of the wealth of conquered kingdoms. Nothing was spent to guarantee the success of this "triumph." Nor were there costly banners or military flags waving in His honor. No marching armies, no blaring trumpets, no rolling drums. But for the popular acclaim there is hardly anything in this parade to justify calling it anything but a Sunday morning outing! The chief Participant Himself rode a borrowed animal hastily

accoutered with borrowed garments. The parade route was strewn, not with rare flowers, but with country greenery hastily stripped from nearby trees. Nor were supporters hired to stage "spontaneous" demonstrations or to incite artificially canned expressions of fanatic enthusiasm for Jesus. Absent were the wealthy, the erudite and the politically powerful. How could this country-festival atmosphere be confused for a proper imperial "triumph"?

Nor was Jesus temporarily accommodating Himself to His excited disciples' expectations and the multitude's mistaken hopes for a materialistic kingdom, as if He felt He must abandon His divine program to condescend for a moment to the level of those who misinterpreted Him. Even though His enemies would attempt to expose Him as an enemy of Rome, as a Zealot's political messiah, His Messianic Entry into Jerusalem had an entirely different flavor. In fact, Mark's final word about Jesus' entrance into the temple leaves the impression he is presenting a poor, Galilean provincial wandering around the great temple like any out-of-town tourist, gazing upon its stupendous construction (Mark 11:11).

No, if a triumph intends to celebrate the accomplishments of the conqueror, this was no "triumph" in the usual sense, because, for Jesus, the greatest battle was yet to be fought and won at the cross and through His victories through the Church. (Cf. Rev. 1:5, 6; 5:9, 10.) This Kingdom was to come about by the shedding of blood, not of its enemies, but of its King!

THE REAL MEANING OF THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

I. THE IMMEDIATE PURPOSE:

PHASE I OF THE "MESSIANIC OFFENSIVE"

A. Jesus entered Jerusalem, the City of the Great King, because He was its true King. Although He did not deny His royal dignity, the insignias of this position are reduced to the minimum absolutely indispensable to display His undeniable royalty as Son of David. Although some royalty is shown in this procession, there is also royal irony intended by Jesus whose entire demeanor fairly shouts: "My kingdom is NOT of this world!" The Messiah's irony may be summarized as follows: (*P.H.C.*, XXII, 487).

1. The superhuman under the garb of the human
2. The majestic under the garb of the lowly

3. The eternal under the garb of the incidental and temporal
4. Unquestionable truth enunciated by an erring crowd

Pharisee, disciple and well-wisher alike failed to understand the high irony of Jesus' choice of the lowly to manifest His highness. It is difficult even for us who are heirs of those disciples to admit how often we fail to appreciate His wisdom. How often our desire for power-plays and pageantry betrays our difference from our Lord and unmasks our failure to understand Him! Paradoxically, however, men would soon forget the pomp of all other great human triumphs of the world conquerors, and yet all common Christians the world over know by heart every detail of this one, most unforgettable moment!

B. Jesus entered Jerusalem to present Himself to the nation as Israel's Messiah. Nevertheless, by doing it in precisely this fashion, He called attention to the full teaching of the inspired prophecies with a view to correcting the popular misconceptions of His mission. He does not refuse openly to declare Himself the awaited Messiah announced by the prophets. But He insists on His own interpretation of how those predictions must be realized, as opposed to the popular expectations. Even as He is saying "yes" to their acclaiming Him their King, He says it in a way that meant "no" to their materialistic ambitions. Consider the curious regality of a "poverty-stricken Messiah"! But His point was well-taken (II Cor. 8:9). This is His true glory.

The era of His "Messianic Reserve" is now over. (See notes on 8:4; 9:30; 13:10-17; 16:20; 17:9.) The truth of His Christhood must now be proclaimed in the most public manner possible. Within His Last Week before the cross there would be no significant opportunity for His materialistic followers to unite and frustrate His planning. Rather it is now time for the most public disclosures of His Messiahship, an announcement of which would occur, in the most formal way possible, in the presence of the Sanhedrin (26:63-66 and par.).

But Jesus did not mean just to declare Himself Messiah in a vacuum. Rather, He offered Himself the spiritual Messiah of Israel, in order to do the kind of teaching before the entire nation during this last week that could have saved His people. This valuable publicity furnished Him the platform from which to make His last, great, personal appeals to get the nation to awaken to the spiritual character of His rule. His goal was to encourage people to embrace Him as Messianic Teacher and Prophet, so they could re-evaluate their ideas of what

the Kingdom must be. So the type of triumphal publicity He sought was not the sort of vain display selfish ambition would choose. Rather, its stark contrast to worldly triumphs underscored the God-sent spiritual character of all He stood for.

Jesus' Christhood must be recognized. Though a hunted man (John 11:57); He courageously permitted Himself to be brought by public procession into Jerusalem accompanied by the explosive enthusiasm of the majority of God's people then living! Such a move was geared to push Israel to a decision about Him and His mission. If men would not admit it, even the rocks would herald His identity (Luke 19:40). Should any doubt whether the crowds intended to attribute Messianic dignity to Jesus, the complaint of the Pharisees is proof against any such doubts, because THEY understood! But the Lord refused to still the crowd's Messianic acclamations, because, however ill-informed the content of their praise, its form expressed the reality. However badly mistaken their grasp of His true mission and identity, He encouraged their adoration and approved it (Luke 19:40), because this loving adoration offered to Him is the basis of all Christian service, sacrifice and suffering. Jesus succeeded in making His point with the majority of the crowd, for, however, feeble their faith, they believed something TRUE about Him. Later they would be in a better position to grasp what it means to confess Jesus as Messiah. But people who hold Him for nothing more than a gentle, however quite human, rabbi, will always be shocked at the "exaggerations and fanaticism" of those who adore Him as Lord and King.

C. Jesus' royal entry into Jerusalem is intended to force the Sanhedrin to act in harmony with God's schedule, rather than their own. The Council intended to slay Jesus "not during the feast, lest there be a tumult among the people" (Matt. 26:5 = Mark 14:2. However does this represent previous thinking of the same men?) By deliberately arousing public sentiment in His Messianic Entry into Jerusalem, He shows the authorities with what kind of threat they must deal decisively and soon. Consider the audacity of this demonstration executed by a wanted man! (John 11:57). The Pharisees, who protested to Jesus to hold back the tidal wave of disciples, not unlikely nodded darkly toward the Tower of Antonia where the Roman garrison was stationed, ready to strike at the barest whisper of revolt. Already bloody uprisings had been brutally quelled with speed and ferocity. Nor was it unlikely that even at that moment an uneasy silence reigned in the Tower as hundreds of Roman eyes were scrutinizing the unauthorized

demonstration growing in excitement and edging ever closer to the City from Olivet.

D. By moving deliberately into Jerusalem in this fashion, Jesus indicated His intention to give His life voluntarily. By personally staging a demonstration calculated to push Jerusalem's leaders to the point of decision and, given their hostility to God and truth, He made His own death a certainty. Further, by taking the initiative, He enjoyed the advantage of remaining in control of the events. He was never a helpless pawn or the unwilling victim of a bad situation, trapped by forces beyond His control. Foster (*Final Week*, 34f.) shows how the royal entry into Jerusalem furnished a dramatic prelude that would draw Israel's attention to the facts which would form the essence of the Gospel:

Jesus was deliberately coming up to Jerusalem to give His life as a ransom for the sins of mankind; it was God's will that the sacrifice should be made in such a public manner that the attention of the world and of the ages should be concentrated upon it. He was not to be assassinated in a dark street or done to death in secret. The proof of the resurrection was to be made incontestable by the fact that the attention of the nation was to be concentrated upon the crucifixion. The triumphal entry threw down the gauntlet to the wicked leaders of the nation in such fashion that they not only brought about His death, but that they turned the nation upside down in the effort to disprove the fact of the resurrection and silence or destroy the people who proclaimed it. Thus, the historic facts which are the foundation of the Christian gospel were tested in the most severe and terrible manner which the devil could invent at the very outset. Thus those in succeeding centuries, who, not having seen were yet to be asked to believe, should have the most complete and unshakeable basis for their faith.

II. THE LONG-RANGE GOAL

By His fulfilment of the former part of Zechariah's prophecy ("Your King is coming to you in poverty on an ass"), He encourages us all to expect with watching and prayer, obedience and work, the fulfilment of the final portion of that prophet's words: "His dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River even to the ends of the earth."

FACT QUESTIONS

1. When did the "Triumphal Entry" occur? Cite all the Scriptures and facts that combine to indicate the day and time.
2. Describe the route the procession took, beginning from the moment Jesus started giving instructions on the basis of which the procession would begin. Where was Jesus as He gave these instructions? To what village must the two disciples go to find the donkeys? In what general area were these places? Could Jesus and the Twelve see Jerusalem before the procession? If so, how? If not, why not? At what point did they see Jerusalem? Who says so?
3. Where did all the people come from who swelled the crowd of disciples? What motivated them to come to meet Jesus and cheer Him into Jerusalem? There may have been more than one motive.
4. Reconcile the account of Matthew with that of Mark, Luke and John who all affirm that Jesus rode upon a colt, whereas Matthew is equally certain Jesus asked for TWO animals.
5. Locate the prophetic allusions cited by Matthew regarding the Messianic entry into Jerusalem. Explain the significance of such citations here.
6. State the exact instructions Jesus gave the two disciples for finding the necessary animals, then tell what they actually experienced as they obeyed Him.
7. Since Matthew asserts that the disciples threw their robes upon both animals, what are we to understand about the expression, "and He sat thereon": the two donkeys or the robes? Which animal did He ride?
8. Describe the "red-carpet treatment" people gave Jesus as He rode along. Where did the folks get the carpet?
9. Explain the meaning of the phrases or words used in each of the popular shouts and explain where the people got them:
 - a. "Hosanna!"
 - b. "Son of David"
 - c. "He that cometh"
 - d. "In the highest"
10. Describe the reaction of the Pharisees in the crowd (as told by Luke and John). What was Jesus' rebuttal? What were these Pharisees doing in the crowd anyway? Are they Jesus' disciples too?
11. According to Luke, what was Jesus' reaction upon seeing the Holy City? What prophetic words did He pronounce in reference to Jerusalem?

12. What reaction did Jesus provoke in the city of Jerusalem upon His arrival? How did people respond to those who asked what was going on? What did they mean?
13. After the Messianic entry into Jerusalem's Temple, what did Jesus do next, according to Mark? What time of day was it when the procession was finished?
14. List the separate facts in the incident that indicate that Jesus was not merely yielding to the wrong-headed Messianic enthusiasm of the people, but rather deliberately taking the initiative and proceeding according to His own spiritual program.
15. List the separate, new facts that Mark, Luke and John add to our total information about this event.

SECTION 55

JESUS CLEANSSES THE TEMPLE A LAST TIME AND RECEIVES WORSHIP OF CHILDREN

(Parallels: Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48)

TEXT: 21:12-17

12 And Jesus entered into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the money-changers, and the seats of them that sold the doves; 13 and he saith unto them, It is written, My house shall be called a house of prayer: but ye make it a den of robbers.

14 And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple; and he healed them. 15 But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children that were crying in the temple and saying, Hosanna to the son of David; they were moved with indignation, 16 and said unto him, Hearest thou what these are saying?

And Jesus saith unto them, Yea: did ye never read, Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise?

17 And he left them, and went forth out of the city to Bethany, and lodged there.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. In your opinion, why should Jesus have felt it necessary to purify the temple at this historic moment and in this particular way?

- b. Matthew, Mark and Luke record this purification at the end of Jesus' ministry, while John records a similar cleansing at the very beginning (John 2:13-22). Do you think these are separate events, and if so, on what basis do you think so? If not, why not?
- c. If you believe that John and the Synoptics record two separate cleansings, what reason would you assign to Jesus' desire to cleanse the temple both at the beginning and at the end of His ministry? If, as we learn from John, He attended a number of feasts in Jerusalem at which people would be changing money and sacrificing, and the merchants would presumably be needed for the same reasons as before and probably in the same places, is it likely that Jesus could have said or done nothing about their presence every time He came? Or is it simpler to assume that the merchants did not return until His last Passover?
- d. Why were the merchants in the Temple anyway? What was so wrong with what they were doing?
- e. Why should the chief priests and scribes have been so disturbed when Jesus purified the Temple? Should not they have been in agreement with Him that such a purification needed to be done?
- f. In your opinion, does not this rather violent demonstration of the spirit of Jesus compromise and sacrifice the spiritual character of His mission?
- g. In what sense are the miracles Jesus worked after the temple cleansing especially appropriate? Or is there any moral connection between the two events?
- h. Matthew does not cite the entire prophecy, as does Mark: "My house shall be called a house of prayer *for all the nations*" (Mark 11:17). Why do you think Matthew left out this latter part which places a definite emphasis on Gentiles?
- i. To what, specifically, does Jesus apply the words "den of robbers"?
- j. If Jesus objects to men's use of the temple of God as a market, on what basis can He justify His turning it into a HOSPITAL? What, if any, is the difference between what the merchants did to the temple, and what Jesus did to it by healing people there? Is there any principle illustrated here which Jesus had taught earlier what people can do on the sabbath? If so, what is it?
- k. How do you account for the fact that the children shout "Hosanna!" the day AFTER the Messianic Entry into Jerusalem?
- l. Why do you think the scribes and chief priests did not scold the children directly for their shouting Messianic slogans in the temple? Why bother Jesus about it?

- m. In what sense is Jesus' justification of the children's praise a tacit affirmation of His deity?
- n. Why would Jesus leave the city of Jerusalem to go to Bethany to spend the night?
- o. How do you think a sensitive Jewish reader would have understood this event, especially if he lived to see the fall of Jerusalem, the desecration and destruction of the Temple during the first century? Do you think he would have tended to see in Jesus' actions a symbol of the judgment that later came upon that nation, city and temple?
- p. Do you see any connection between this story and using the name of God and the Church to promote financial causes or programs? If so, what connection? If not, why not? Does anything Jesus said or did here touch on the problem of Christian stewardship or financing the Kingdom of God? If so, how, or if not, why not?

PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Jesus and the disciples arrived in Jerusalem from Bethany. When He entered the court of God's temple, He began to drive out all the merchants and their customers. He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the benches of the dove merchants. Nor would He allow anyone to use the temple courts as a shortcut for transporting goods.

As He taught them, He said, "The Bible says, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.' But you have reduced it to a 'den of robbers!'" Now the chief priests and theologians heard all He said, because everyday He taught at the temple. So the blind people and the lame approached Him there, and He healed them. But when the hierarchy and theologians witnessed the wonderful things He did and the children chanting in the temple courts, "Glory to the Son of David!" they were furious and reproached Him, "Can you not hear what these children are saying?"

"Of course," Jesus replied. "And have you perhaps never read, 'Out of the mouth of children and babes in arms, You have procured for yourself perfect praise?'"

At this the chief priests and theologians and leading citizens sought a method to eliminate Him, because they feared Him. Yet they were frustrated, not finding any way to do it, since the vast majority of people was swayed by His teaching. They listened to His words with eager attention.

So when evening came, He left them and went out of the city to Bethany where He spent the night.

SUMMARY

After spending His first night in the Jerusalem area at Bethany, Jesus crossed the Mount of Olives to the city and cursed the fig tree. Then, upon entering the temple court, He cleared out the money-changers and the merchants of animals as well as their customers, refusing to permit anyone to use the Temple as a shortcut or for anything but worship. His vigorous protests did not hinder, but apparently encouraged needy people to approach Him for healing and the children to praise Him. Incensed, the hierarchy objected to His apparent acceptance of Messianic ascriptions of praise. He parried their protests with Scripture. This only fueled their wrath to the point of desiring His elimination, but their efforts to excogitate a workable scheme ended in failure, since the common people eagerly accepted His teaching. At day's end, Jesus left the people in the temple and Jerusalem to return to Bethany for the night.

NOTES

I. RELIGIOUS RACKETEERING

21:12 And Jesus entered into the temple of God. For fuller notes on the chronological sequence of these events, see before 21:1: "Matthew's Method." *The temple* consisted of a series of courtyards within courtyards in the innermost of which (the court "of the priests") stood the sanctuary proper (*naòs*). Each successive courtyard was accessible only to designated persons, i.e. Hebrews, women and Gentiles respectively, but all courtyards were considered part of the *temple of God* (*hieròn toû theoù*). The outermost courtyard, into which Jesus would first enter, was the place specified where Gentiles could worship. On the south side of the temple square, this court measured 70 square meters (750 sq. ft.) and was paved with marble (Edersheim, *Temple*, 45). Into this latter enclosure a market had been introduced, according to the Talmud (Jerus, *Chagiga* 78a), by a certain Baba Ben Buta, who "brought 3000 sheep of the flocks of Kedar into the Mount of the House, i.e. into the court of the Gentiles, and so within the consecrated precincts" (*P.H.C.*, XXII, 483). Although not the first to do this, he doubtless did so to meet the needs

of the poor. (Cf. Edersheim, *Life*, I, 370ff.) His motive was above question, but in caring for the Jewish poor, he trampled on the rights of the poor Gentiles! His Jewish sectarianism blinded his own eyes and that of others to Gentiles' right of access to God, and paved the way for shekel-minded profiteers to seize upon this innovation as an excuse to perpetuate this "right-minded" convenience for all foreign Jews who desired to purchase their sacrifices close at hand.

Jesus . . . cast out all them that sold. That this represents a second cleansing of the Temple is seen from the following comparison:

FIRST CLEANSING (John 2)

1. Occurred at the first Passover of Jesus' ministry (John 2:13).
2. Animals mentioned particularly: cattle, sheep, doves (John 2:14).
3. Jesus used scourge on animals (John 2:15).
4. Money-changers' tables overturned.
5. Dove-sellers ordered to transport wares out of temple (John 2:16).
6. "Make not my Father's house a house of merchandise" (2:16).
7. Disciples' reaction indicated (John 2:17).
8. Jews challenged Jesus' right (John 2:18).
9. Jesus answered with prophetic sign of resurrection (John 2:19-22).
10. Jesus worked miracles (John 2:23).
11. Disciples believed Scriptures and Jesus (John 2:22).
12. Jesus' prophetic ministry largely yet future and its outcome not yet decided by events.

SECOND CLEANSING (Synoptics)

1. Occurred just prior to last Passover of Jesus' life (Matt. 26:2).
2. Only doves specially mentioned (Matt. 21:12).
3. No scourge mentioned.
4. Money-changers' tables overturned.
5. No similar order cited.
6. Quotation of Isa. 56:7 and Jer. 7:11: "House of prayer now a den of thieves."
7. No disciples' reaction indicated.
8. Chief rulers challenge Jesus' sense of propriety (Matt. 21:16).
9. Jesus answered with Scripture (Ps. 8:2). Prophetic sign not cited but known (Matt. 26:61; Mark 14:58).
10. Jesus worked miracles (Matt. 21:14).
11. Children praise Him (Matt. 21:15).
12. The outcome of Jesus' prophetic ministry already decided.

The Synoptics did not record the first cleansing, since they omitted the early Judean ministry completely (cf. John 2:13—4:4). John, conversely, could safely bypass the second purification of the temple, because its message is virtually included in the former and could be omitted, since the Synoptics had already recounted it.

Still, why should a second cleansing be thought necessary?

1. Because Jesus was not so respected in the capital, that one purification would have permanently stamped out the scandalous market. Rather, the power bloc in Jerusalem would have been more than eager to regard with public contempt His pretended right to purify the temple.
2. Because persistent graft would have driven the selfish to reinstate what brought them such profits, repeated show-downs would be unavoidable. Consistency would dictate its cleansing every time the abuse repeated itself. But, had they reinstalled the market in the interval between the first and last Passovers of Jesus' ministry, would He have let them get away with it? He may, rather, have ignored its presence, intending to hit it one more time—hard—this last week in connection with the final crisis.
3. Because those driven out the first time had finally found courage to return. It may have taken two or three years for the hierarchy, whose personal profit was most menaced by the market's removal, to re-establish their pet project within the holy precincts. If they were letting the flames cool which Jesus had ignited at the first cleansing, they perhaps thought it politically expedient to wait a year or so before re-inaugurating the temple bazaar.

All them that sold in the temple . . . money-changers . . . them that sold doves. These merchants were needed in Jerusalem to sell sacrificial animals to worshippers who had travelled distances too great to transport their animals with them. Even God Himself had forseen this need (Deut. 14:24ff.). The money exchange was thought necessary to convert foreign coins, brought in by the pilgrims from outside Palestine, into the "shekel of the sanctuary" for the payment of the temple tax (cf. Exod. 30:13; Matt. 17:24 notes), other free-will offerings and purifications. (Cf. *Shekalim* 1:1-3; Acts 21:24; see *bBerakoth* 47b; *Bekhoroth* 8:7.) Doves, or pigeons, were essential for ritual purifications (cf. John 11:55; Lev. 15:14, 29), but mainly for the sacrifices of the poor (Lev. 5:7, 11; 12:8; 14:22; Luke 2:22-24). These latter were sold in four shops (Jer. Taan. 4:8). Further, sacrificial animals had to be inspected for suitability (Lev. 3:6; 4:3, 23, 28, 32: "without defect"). Even these inspectors could charge a certain amount for their approval (*Bekhor* 4:5). Although Sanhedrin regulations governed the charges that could be made for money exchange and inspection services (see Edersheim, *Temple*, 72), the presence of the Temple market would psychologically lead people to argue, "Better get the right money from authorized changers, than haggle with

unauthorized dealers! If our animal purchase from others elsewhere risks being disqualified on a technicality by temple inspectors, better buy them from the priests themselves, than lose money on unqualified animals!" This thinking leads to a practical monopoly on the entire sacrificial procedure. However, God had not indicated WHERE or FROM WHOM worshippers should purchase things necessary for the feasts (John 13:29).

But if profit-taking from foreign exchange transactions is an old, respected, professional institution, what was their crime? The abuse consisted in the following facts:

1. The market did not need to stand in the very court of the temple where Gentiles were granted the freedom to worship God. Even if no money were involved, the alien peoples were being robbed, not of their wealth, but of their right to worship. The suspicion that this stockyard stood in the larger court is justified by the fact that its noise and dirt would not have been tolerated in the courts nearest the actual sacrificing and worship of the Hebrew men and women. Thoughtfulness on the part of the market's planners should have dictated that the bazaar be located elsewhere, even just outside the temple's walls. But thoughtfulness or consideration of Gentiles' rights was not their strong point. If Caiaphas and company were to protect their monopoly, it had to be kept inside the temple.
2. The unbridled graft of the merchants and money-changers is implied in Jesus' accusation that they had turned God's house into a "den of robbers." Josephus, too, charges Annas, son of Anna, of greed (*Ant.* XX, 8,8; 9:2). Greed had replaced reverence in the temple.

Edersheim (*Life*, I, 367ff.) furnishes the following devastating evidence of this. The markets were called "the Bazaars of the sons of Annas." An aroused, angry population rose and eliminated these bazaars in 67 A.D., decidedly due to the shameful grasping that marked that business (Siphre on Deut. sec. 105; Jer. Peah. 1:6). Profits from the sale of sacrifices were funnelled into the temple treasury for the priests' use. The money changers, too, likely had to buy from leading temple officials their right to pocket a percentage of their profits.

3. Another reason for Jesus' unhesitating hostility to these banking tables is undoubtedly their location, because, for the unwary

visiting Hebrews, the location in the temple communicated an unmistakable aura of sanctity to the services these bankers offered. If they preferred not to deal with unauthorized exchanges elsewhere, they could surely trust these operating within the jurisdiction of God's house. Not subject to competitive tensions of a free market and shielded by the name of God, these moneychangers and animal sellers dishonored God by their monopoly profits.

4. Not only were the merchants at fault, but other thoughtless people, quite unconnected with the market, desecrated the holy place by their noisy passage through its courts as a convenient shortcut to another part of the city (Mark 11:16). This thoughtless disregard for the uniquely sacred purpose for which God ordered the temple built, stole the Gentiles' right to pray unhindered. This made those who did it **THIEVES** in the sight of God whose House it was.

It was into such a temple that the Son of its Owner strode that morning. No wonder **He cast them all out!** Detractors join His original critics to accuse Him of an unworthy outburst of violent anger, indicator of human weakness that vitiates His sinlessness.

1. Far from being a sign of human weakness, this judicial act, expressed Jesus' moral power, in that He vindicated the high honor of God and His House. It would have been a trait of human weakness, had He **NOT** done so! This means that **ANY JEW**, filled with a holy zeal for God, should have cleansed the temple long before now. That the whole nation yielded without a serious objection to the interested connivance of their hierarchy, should forever prove who **REALLY** was compromised by human weakness. (Remember God's blessing on Phinehas! Num. 25:7-13; Ps. 106:30f. And Jesus did not even use a spear!)
2. Rather than exemplify a gross lack of tact or bare iconoclasm, Jesus' attack on crass commercialism in the name of God appealed directly to what ideally was at the heart of every true Hebrew's consciousness of God; respect for the temple of Jahweh. From this point of view, Jesus' proceeding against the abuses is "the most profoundly conservative Jewish act," (Godet citing Beyschlag, *John*, 370) and true Hebrew patriotism.
3. The responsibility for the war rests with those who break the peace. Jesus did not disturb the peace: the guilt for that lay squarely on the shoulders of a corrupt high-priesthood. He simply restored the original peace, because of His merciful, sympathetic concern for people in danger of missing God in that temple.

4. There is here no inconsistency with Jesus' healing the sick in the temple after kicking out the merchants. Ever the Good Shepherd, He drives away the wolves, hirelings and thieves, while at the same time calling His sheep around Him. It is the same spirit that motivates Him, on the one hand, to purify God's House of its polluters or that stimulates Him to help those impeded by human wickedness, on the other. They are just two sides of the same coin.

And for those who criticize Jesus for ignoring many other abuses crying for the attention of the social reformer, by striding into the temple to clean house, let it be said that He was not blind to the former. Rather, He simply recognized that the best way to deal with the blatantly iniquitous social conditions through which He walked was to bring judgment to the House of God first (Ezek. 9:6; I Peter 4:17). As long as the temple and people of God were opposed to the purposes of God, society could not be cured. But the contrary is also true: while the ruin of the people is the fault of its priests, the people faithful to God should also demand better priests! (Jer. 5:31). Jesus is no shallow social reformer easily satisfied with surface changes. He strode right to the heart of society's ills: a perverted and avaricious priesthood and a polluted temple.

He cast them all out. It is mistaken to suppose that the vendors and buyers said absolutely nothing, or that Jesus turned on them a superhuman gaze or divine radiance that stunned them into automatic submission. Although He certainly COULD have done so, is it necessary to the accomplishment of His task as this is seen in the Synoptics or even in John 2:12ff.? The submission of those who surrendered, when they were numerous enough and physically strong enough easily to have overpowered Jesus, may otherwise be accounted for:

1. There was moral power in Christ's sinlessness that made cowards of these materialists. His voice, ringing with zeal for God and hard as steel because He demanded truth and righteousness, pierced their long-sleeping conscience, accusing them of violating their own professed principles. So He had on His side the conscience, not only of the onlookers, but of the merchants themselves.
2. That Jesus could so single-handedly break up the priests' monopoly without any significant opposition may have been due not only to the majestic fury He expressed, but also to the popular support of thousands of pilgrims, resentful of the many years these greedy merchants had taken advantage of them. Although their own boldness was not ready to join Him in His attack, their heart could

definitely recognize the rightness of His deed. It was not unlikely that this very corruption of the temple drove the pious among the Essenes to consider this sanctuary "off limits" and justify themselves in offering sacrifices of their own elsewhere (Josephus, *Ant.*, XVIII,1,5). Lack of any public support for the merchants further weakened their will to resist.

3. He succeeded in doing what it would have taken a troop of soldiers to do, because He had the element of surprise in His favor and pressed His advantage without let-up until reaching His objective.

This majestic roughness is, rather, the sort of thing to be expected, if the Lord ever came suddenly to His temple (Mal. 3:1) to purify the Levites (Mal. 3:2, 3) and to begin the terrible judgment of God at the sanctuary (Ezek. 9:6), even if the temple cleansing does not exhaust all the meaning of these great prophecies.

II. ROYAL REVERENCE

21:13 **And he saith unto them.** Jesus' action was no merely dramatic symbol left for others to interpret. His rationale must be clearly expressed in propositional revelation. **It is written:** from the form of Jesus' rhetorical question (as quoted by Mark 11:17, "Is it not written . . .?") which expected an affirmative answer, it is clear that the Lord hereby intended to defend His course of action on the basis of Biblical texts well-known and unquestionably accepted by His challengers. He depended upon the truthful, valid revelations of Old Testament Scriptures.

A. WHAT GOD'S HOUSE SHOULD BE

My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations (Isa. 56:7).

Although throughout his Gospel Matthew has laid such obvious stress on the place of Gentiles in plan of God (see Special Study: "The Participation of Gentiles" at the end of this volume), it is surprising that he should have omitted what Mark quotes: "for all nations." This would perhaps have been an excellent opportunity to underscore the fact that God loved the Gentiles enough to accept their burnt offerings and sacrifices on His altar and give them joy in His house of prayer (Isa. 56:7a, b).

This omission cannot but draw attention to Jesus' true emphasis on the temple abuses which practically obstructed all Gentile attempts to worship God through *prayer*.

However, it could be fairly argued that Matthew did not HAVE to cite the missing phrase in order to make this point:

1. Because anyone who knew where the market was located, knew that the abuse to be corrected was hindering Gentiles, not Jewish, efforts to worship.
2. Because anyone who knew Isaiah 56:7 could automatically complete anything Matthew omitted, especially from their own familiarity with Isaiah's context that so clearly pictured universal religion beyond any racial, cultural or geographic discrimination. Access to God was not to be controlled nor hindered by sordid business interests of a bio-geographic elite. Rather, access to the God of Israel must remain universal, open to all, not blocked by the shameful comportment of this religion's representatives and custodians. On the other hand, the restoration of the rights of Gentiles in the temple courts may not have been emphasized by Matthew, because the early readers might have wrongly deduced that mere restoration of those rights would have sufficed, whereas God intended a totally new temple! (Eph. 2:11-22).

Nothing could sting the holders of religious power more than this public accusation that exposed them as flagrant violators of the very Word of God of which they claimed to be the only authorized defenders and interpreters. Worse yet, even outsiders—the non-Jews—knew that this area of the temple had been designed by God as a quiet, orderly place for their prayers, but that it had been sabotaged! (Study I Kings 8:29f., 33, esp. 41-43; Ps. 27:4; 65:4.) The avaricious and corrupt high priestly family stood before God and man as guilty of gross violation of God's original intent behind the temple's original function.

B. WHAT GOD'S HOUSE HAD BECOME

But you make it a den of robbers (Jer. 7:11). In Jeremiah's day the temple was frequented by people who, while loudly professing their awareness that the Jerusalem sanctuary was really "the Temple of the Lord," nevertheless dealt unjustly with each other, oppressed

the alien, the fatherless and the widow, shed innocent blood and followed other gods, stole, murdered, committed adultery and perjury. Incredibly, they added insult to their injury of God by supposing that this manner of life could continue on indefinitely, precisely because of God's house in their midst AS A GOOD-LUCK CHARM against any possible future misfortunes. But God considered it really a **den of robbers**.

The objection, that a robbers' den is not used for robbing but as a refuge for robbers, misses the point, because, if anyone stumbled unawares into a "den of robbers" (= refuge, hiding place, home, etc.), he would as surely be robbed there as anywhere else. A Gentile who discovered God and His house and thinking it is a true temple, would be as surely robbed of his new-found faith and piety there by the temple's own custodians, as he would by being waylaid by the desecrations of the same people elsewhere (cf. Rom. 2:17-24!).

You make it a den of robbers. The glaring contrast between "house of prayer" and "den of robbers" places Jesus in diametric opposition to the priesthood's administration of the temple sanctioned by the elders. Thus He is charging this high body with profanity and is attacking an exceedingly powerful private interest. But the religion of the God of Israel must not be turned into a lucrative source of profit for anyone! Here once again we see the paradoxical converging of (1) the religious pride of the elect people of God and (2) the shamelessness of their immorality. Just as Isaiah and Jeremiah had done in their day, so now Jesus blasts Israel's religious pride and self-seeking, mercenary activities. A **den of robbers** was a verdict right out of their own Bible! Rather than offer the grace of God freely and generously to all people, the shepherds of Israel only grudgingly opened God's temple to non-Israelites, and so pampered Jewish national pride. They used God and temple for their own advantage, taking advantage of the weakness and ignorance of poor, innocent people. Exploiting people by charging exorbitant prices for sacrifices is no less the sin of stealing than is robbery.

Further, if Jesus is right in judging the temple to be governed by conditions also prevailing in Jeremiah's day, conditions that demanded divine vengeance, just as He had done earlier at Shiloh's tabernacle with identical justification (Jer. 7:12-15), would not these same conditions demand that God destroy the temple again? This

judgment by Jesus should alert us to expect Him to prophesy the temple's destruction. In this way He prepares the reader's mind for Matthew 23:38 and 24:2. In fact, a few decades later the temple actually became even more literally a cave of murderers, as the Assassins turned it into a theater for their atrocities. (See Josephus, *Wars*, IV,3,7; §§10,12; IV,6,3.) Yet, even Jeremiah offered mercy to those who repent (Jer. 7:5, 7). Does Jesus' citation of Jeremiah's ominous phrase imply that repentance is their only hope of saving their lives, their temple and their nation?

III. RIGHT RESPONSE

21:14 And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple. This quiet sentence silences all who put down Jesus' temple cleansing to a reprehensible outburst of violent anger. The Lord's ringing condemnation of the unholy treatment of God's house and merciless exposure of its administrators certainly did not deter the needy from approaching this same Lord to seek merciful help. In the midst of Jesus' overturning of tables, scattering coins and knocking down benches, His roughness with the vendors, sellers and the indifferent traipsing through the temple and despite His wrath against all that defiled, these needy people were unable to discern any pettishness or rejection in His words or manner. Rather, in the marvelous compassion He was displaying toward the Gentiles as He cleared the market out of the courtyard designated for their worship, the troubled Hebrews could sense a kindness that invited them too.

WHY THESE MIRACLES IN THE TEMPLE?

By what right does the Nazarene turn God's House from a market into a HOSPITAL?! How would His miracles be conducive to prayer, when His own protest implied that the market distracted the mind from God? Would not the amazed witnesses' exclamations be as fully distracting to Gentiles as would the bawling of cattle merchants and the clink of the money-changers' coins? How could He justify that?

1. These unfortunates may have approached Jesus, not immediately after the temple cleansing, but while "he was teaching daily in the temple" (Luke 19:47a). In fact, healing and instruction probably continued all the rest of that day. (See Matt. 21:17f.; Mark 11:12,

- 19.) If so, while Matthew's repeated expression, "in the temple" (vv. 12, 14, 15) seems to imply immediate connection with the cleansing, he does not offer us tight time connections. Jesus may have healed them after the stated hours for prayer or in some temple area other than in the Court of the Gentiles.
2. On the other hand, if He did these miracles right in the still untidy court before the dust had settled on the debris, even as the last hawker scrambled to collect his scattered shekels, Jesus desired to show how a righteous anger that eliminates what is wrong, is perfectly harmonious with doing what is positively right. Merciful healing for the sightless and crippled is motivated not only by compassionate love but also by a deep and holy anger at what left them helpless, anger enough to do the thing needed to eliminate that evil from their lives. (Cf. John 11:33, 35, 38; Mark 3:5; see my comments on 5:22.)
 3. If the Qumran *Rule of Congregation* (1 QM 2:5-22) excluded the lame, blind, deaf and dumb from the congregation and from the Messianic banquet, and if the Mishnah excluded them from appearing before the Lord in the temple (cf. Chagigah 1:1), then, Jesus, the Lord of the temple, not only encouraged their approach, but also qualified them to worship by eliminating their disability and consequent disqualification.
 4. If the temple is a "house of prayer," then should not these, who believe Jesus to be the direct channel for the power of God, address their petitions to Him in His Father's house? This was converted by Jesus into no mere hospital, where the infirm may convalesce slowly, but into a veritable door of Heaven where men were made perfectly and instantly whole by the power of Him whose House it was. If the temple IS God's house, as Jesus declares, cannot He do anything He wants to in His own house?!
 5. The exalted authority, that our Lord had claimed to exercise, required evidence of His right so to act. The miracles became His credentials to support His implied right. It is clear that God approved, since no man could do these things unless God were with him! (John 3:2; 10:37f.; 14:10f.; Acts 10:38).
 6. Further, if the temple's purpose was to turn Gentiles' attention to the true, living God who answers prayers and really helps men on earth, then Jesus' miracles, which tended to produce this very effect (Matt. 15:31), harmonized perfectly with the temple's intended use.

And he healed them, not in some obscure village or distant desert where none could test the reality of His power to cure. Rather, He did it in the capital city, right in its temple under the skeptical scrutiny of His severest critics. And because all was so public, the multitudes of eye-witnesses, awed by His miracles and amazed by His teaching (Mark 11:18; Luke 19:48), proved to be a psychologically impassible barrier around Jesus, stymying His foes' plot to suppress Him. Nothing could stop Him from doing good, whether on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1-14) or in the temple! In short, He practiced His own principle that God wants mercifulness and not merely sacrifice. (See notes on 12:7.)

IV. RAGING REACTIONARIES

21:15 **The chief priests** were Sadducees (Acts 5:17; Josephus, *Ant.*, XX,9,1). These Sadducean high priests were dedicated, among other things, to these points:

1. A purely materialistic world-view that all but denied God's right to be present in and act within His own creation. (Cf. Matt. 22:23; Acts 23:8.)
2. A liberal view of the Old Testament canon that left little room for conscientious service to God that tried to go by ALL the Book.

Jesus' dramatic protest and His appeal to Scripture instantly drew fire from the aristocracy, because He threatened the security of their hold on a lucrative source of income. Until the Last Week, objections to Jesus had come from the Pharisees. Now, however, He has just touched the nerve-center of the high priests, the temple. Consequently, these elitists will figure even more prominently among Jesus' opponents until they all finally collaborate to perpetrate His judicial murder. (They are mentioned 19 times: 21:15,23,45; 26:3,14,47,57,59,62,63,65; 27:1,3,6,12,20,41,62; 28:11.)

When the chief priests and the scribes saw, they became first-hand witnesses, therefore qualified to give authoritative testimony to the reality of His marvelous deeds. What did they see?

1. **The wonderful things that He did.**

- a. His proper display of orthodox zeal for the holiness of the temple, backed by Scripture they could not publicly deny.
 - (1) Although Sadducees neglected the prophets (Edersehim, *Life*, II,397), the Lord did not hesitate to cite them as

God's Word, because of their thoroughly adequate attestation as spokesmen for God and because of their place in the more widely recognized Jewish canon.

(2) Sadducean rejection of the prophets would be exposed even further, if they had publicly objected to His citations from Isaiah and Jeremiah, for "all men held them to be prophets of God" too. (Cf. Author's *Matthew*, III,434f.)

- b. They must have stood speechless in the presence of Jesus' undeniable miracles (21:14), because they were unquestionable evidence of real, supernatural power operative through Jesus in the realm of the real, testable, material world. This they could not oppose without denying what they themselves had personally witnessed nor without reverting to the already discredited Pharisean contention that His power was really that of the devil (Matt. 12:24ff.).

2. and the children that were crying in the temple and saying, Hosanna to the Son of David. We see here:

- a. The joyous enthusiasm of children attracted to Jesus because they knew He loved them. He was no ogre whose supposedly vicious attack in the temple should have frightened children. Rather, they approach Him, shouting His praise shortly after the temple cleansing and in psychologically direct connection with the Messianic demonstration the day before during the triumphal entry (Mark 11:1, 12, 15). The temple cleansing rekindled their enthusiasm and set them to chanting His Messianic glory. He really wanted "the little children to come to" Him (cf. 19:13-15 notes) and they could sense this even without artificial invitations or prompting.
- b. The unprejudiced sincerity of these children is obvious in their evident lack of that self-protecting prudence so characteristic of their elders who could better grasp something of the deadly struggle taking place between Jesus and authorities.
- c. The manifest rightness of these children's confession is vindicated by no less an authority than Jesus Himself. However little they understood the issues at stake, what they uttered was TRUTH, and, as far as it went, that TRUTH must be defended and believed and acted upon, even if spoken by children.

But, having witnessed all this evidence of the Lord's glory, rather than submitting their souls to His leadership, **the chief priests and scribes . . . were indignant!** Godet (*John*, 364) notes:

We meet here a fact, which will repeat itself at every manifestation of the Lord's glory; a twofold impression is produced, according to the moral predisposition of the witnesses; some find in the act of Jesus nourishment for their faith; for others the same act becomes a subject of offense. It is the pre-existing moral sympathy or antipathy that determines the impression.

The Sadducean temple priests are deeply threatened by Jesus, because, far from keeping His particular claims or teaching to Himself, He insisted on asserting His understanding of God right in Jerusalem and even in the temple precincts themselves! Unpopular with the majority, the priestly power had no refuge other than the temple, and the Galilean Prophet publicly threatened not only the impending end of their monopoly on the temple but also of the power they derived therefrom (Luke 13:35; cf. Matt. 23:38; John 2:20 with Matt. 26:61). Many reasons serve to explain the hierarchy's outrage:

1. They were the offenders, enraged at Christ's rebuking them by exposing their gross, wanton unfaithfulness to their God-given duty, in the presence of those whose opinion of their piety they had cultivated with great care.
2. They were pompous officials, men of rank and dignity, annoyed by the boldness and "naughtiness" of the children in their holy temple.
3. Because they were unbelievers, they expressed impotent rage at any form of public recognition given to Jesus' claims to Christhood, thinking it childish blasphemy, while totally blind to the blasphemy of their own lives. **Hosanna to the Son of David:** because this shout is the basis of the priests' objection to Jesus' tacit permission of the children's praise, it forever proves how Jewish authorities of Jesus' day understood this title. Now, none can argue, as some modern Jewish scholars try, that these words do not convey the concept of a personal Messiah promised to Israel who would actually be born of David's family. Rather, to any objection that those children were only singing innocent Psalms, whereas silence was called for, the authorities of Israel

then present silence these quibbles by practically shouting, "Do you not hear what they are saying?!" These understood.

4. Because they were fearful, they may have been maddened by their own ineptness in dealing with a problem that rightly lay within their responsibility to solve.
 - a. They lacked courage to act in their proper official capacity as the guarantors of orthodoxy. (Contrast Saul of Tarsus!)
 - b. They feared His popular influence. Their concern would be for national security, their own position and nation (John 11:48). They clearly grasped the universality of His appeal, as representative groups from the entire nation (*ho laòs gàr hàpas*) sympathized with Him.
 - c. Or did they fear the tremendous firepower at His disposal, which had not yet been unleashed against them? Did they fear Him as a powerful magician in the service of Satan? (Cf. John 18:4-8 with Matt. 26:53.)
 - d. While we cannot absolutely discount a supernatural manifestation of the majesty of His deity only slightly dimmed by human flesh, is it likely that Jesus had to awe them with this glory to hold them at bay until their hour had struck? (Study Luke 22:52f.)
 - e. They feared the people whose applause for Jesus heralded Him as their Hero. They could foresee that, if they touched so much as a hair of Jesus' head, an aroused citizenry would begin to clamor for their expulsion. Could they ride out the furious firestorm that must issue?

21:16. These politicians, who socialized with those who could promote their interests and used the little people for their own ends, were aghast that the Galilean dared to defend the cause of the down-trodden, the foreigner, and diseased and the juveniles. So, frustrated by their own lack of arguments against His miracles, afraid to object to the multitudes' joyous demonstrations of religious enthusiasm, and cornered by their own confusion, they can only object weakly to the unsought praise given Jesus by little children! Helplessly, they ask, **Do you hear what these are saying?**

Should it appear unlikely that there were crowds of excited children in the temple courts, since surely the temple police would have quickly and capably stopped them, had they really been shouting what Matthew reports, notice that:

1. Jesus' critics hold Him responsible to attend to the children, implying that HE must shut them up, as if such police did not have that responsibility.
2. Is it unthinkable that, during the great feasts, when the whole nation was gathered together, the children should have organized themselves for games during their free time, or even for just such praise and dancing as seems evident here? Let Matthew's critics go study children!
3. The question uppermost with the priests is not noise per se, but WHAT the boys were shouting.
4. Further, THIS day was like no other upon which modern critics should base their judgment, since, as Barclay (*Matthew*, II,274) says:

Things were happening that day in the Temple Court which had never happened before. It was not every day that the traders and the money-changers were sent packing, and . . . the blind and the lame were healed. Maybe ordinarily it would have been impossible for the children to shout like this, but then this was no ordinary day.

Their complaint is as ironic as the whole scene is natural:

1. They who for so long had promoted the noisy market in the temple, with its stinking animals and dusty, haggling merchants, because there was money in it for them, now sanctimoniously declare themselves to be scandalized by the singing of innocent lads who thus desecrate the sacred temple of the Lord!
2. Worse, they are now as wrong in demanding the crushing of the boys' enthusiasm, as they had earlier been mistaken in not abolishing the temple bazaar themselves!

Since Jesus could have quieted the children, but had not done so, the priests lay the blame on Him for allowing the shameful situation to continue. In this implied rebuke, these Sadducees echo the Pharisees' bitter jealousy, "Master, rebuke thy disciples!" (Luke 19:39). Perhaps they expect this provincial prophet to back down, mumble an apology or perhaps sneak out of town. Instead, He meets their challenge with quiet defiance.

V. A REFINED REMINDER

21:16 **And Jesus said to them, Yes.** In fact, could He have FAILED to notice language the content of which cried out for notice? He

calmly goes about His work as Messiah, mirroring the ancient adage: "Let another's mouth praise you." Without explicitly affirming His Messiahship, He deliberately permitted the boys to chant the truth that He longed to impress upon people by His deeds and teaching.

The fuming authorities ask, "Do you not HEAR?" to which Jesus demands, **Have YOU never READ?** Had they known their Bible—as they above all Hebrews should have known it—had they recalled those very Scriptures they claimed to honor and teach, they could have remembered that text which completely vindicated everything to which they had just now objected!

In order better to appreciate Jesus' highly condensed rebuttal, we must comprehend the objection that provoked it. In fact, both the objection and Jesus' answer are highly compressed, implying several unstated propositions. We might attempt to express the detractors' unstated logic as follows:

1. The children call you "Son of David," a title equivalent to "Messiah," our national Hebrew Ideal Man, God Anointed sent to bless Israel.
2. But you, Jesus, are but a common man like any other and your program is a bad representation of the great Messianic Kingdom of David's Son.
3. Therefore, you could not be the Messiah, God's Ideal Man, Son of David.
4. Therefore, honesty should compel you to silence the children's ignorant and misdirected praise. Consistency would demand that your anxiety to remove what you term "disorder in God's House" should also eliminate these urchins' unjustifiable outbursts.

Their fundamental objection is thus based on what appears to them to be His painfully evident common humanness. They suppose that His ordinariness disqualifies Him for Messiahship. So, how does Jesus answer the dignitaries? He simply quoted Psalm 8:2.

MATTHEW 21:16

Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings

You have perfected praise.

HEBREW ORIGINAL OF PSALM 8:2

Out of the mouth of children and sucklings because of your adversaries, You have created a power to still Your enemy and the revengeful.

Many correctly affirm that Psalm 8 is not Messianic in the usual sense of explicitly predicting some phase of Christ's ministry, person or work. Nevertheless, that Psalm 8 is definitely Christological

(= Messianic) is forever established by Jesus who used it to defend, not merely little children, but specifically to vindicate **what they are saying**, i.e. praise to Jesus as Messiah. So the **CONTENT** of the boys' praise finds its defense, according to the Lord, in Psalm 8 too. We may expect, then, that this Psalm describe, even indirectly, what Messiah must be or do. In fact, is there any reason, inherent in the Psalm or in Jesus' situation, why the connection Jesus draws between what the children are saying and the Psalm itself, should not be weighed into a proper exegesis of this text?

Because Jesus' recorded answer consists in a brief citation of one portion of a verse from Psalm 8, the question arises:

1. Did He intend to refer exclusively to the verse cited?
 - a. If so, is He merely making some logical argument, as, for example, from the smaller to the greater? That is, "If infants can speak truly when praising God, as Psalm 8 shows, why complain, if larger children speak truly about me? Deal with the infants in Psalm 8 first, then come complain about these bigger children here!"
 - b. Or, is He leading these priestly scholars into the deeper meaning of the verse cited? And would not that meaning be rooted in its context? But this conducts us to the following possibility:
2. Is He not, rather, alluding to the entire Psalm in which the verse cited not only finds its context and significance, but of which it is also the capsulized summation?

If accepted, this latter view includes the former and would reveal Jesus' interpretation of the Psalm's true meaning and, at the same time, would reveal the smashing brilliance of His defense.

So, if we have correctly surmised that Jesus intends to establish the correctness of the children's words by citing this Psalm, we must also correctly intuit the logical steps by which He does this. Jesus' highly condensed argument may be expressed in the following equations:

God's Ideal Man = Messiah = David's Son = Little Baby = Man at his weakest = God's normal means to silence His enemies, rule the earth and glorify Himself. Therefore, a fully human, apparently feeble Messiah is not unthinkable, but even highly probable. Therefore, my genuine humanness is no disqualification for Messiahship, but rather an extremely appropriate qualification and an invitation to examine my other credentials.

Consider each step individually:

I. GOD'S IDEAL MAN TO RULE THE EARTH IS THE MESSIAH

- A. This proposition is only apparently extraneous to the general discussion, but is really fundamental to it and most appropriate.
 1. In fact, the Hebrew officials could not discern in Jesus that exquisite combination of qualities they should have associated with the Ideal Man whom God would anoint to be Messiah.
 2. Further, by pointing His detractors to Psalm 8, the Lord instantly raises the issue of what sort of Ideal Man God has in mind to be His Anointed One.
- B. Thus, if then-contemporary Judaism thought of their Ideal Man as a Jewish Superman, their concept must be modified to match God's promises concerning the true nature of "the Anointed One."
- C. God's Ideal Man, the fitting Leader of mankind, is Messiah, a fact implicitly recognized by the Biblical Judaism of the centuries preceding Jesus' appearance on earth. (Many precious prophecies laid the groundwork for this concept, e.g.: Gen. 3:15; Deut. 18:15-18; II Sam. 7:11-16; Ps. 2; 110:1-4; Isa. 7:14; 8:13f.; 9:2-7; 11:1ff.; 40:3-11; 42:1-7; 52:13—53:12; 61:1ff.; Zech. 9:9; Mal. 3:1, etc.)
- D. It would be a temptation for Judaism to make the mistake of assuming that Messiah would suddenly appear in His glory, fully endowed with supernatural power, however bearing no really radical connection with the misery and humiliation involved in the human condition. Such a view, however, must be corrected by the observation that, since the Christ is a true Son of David, He must be thought of as a real, human baby born of real Davidic ancestry. (See Prop. III below.)

II. THE MESSIAH IS THE SON OF DAVID

- A. No right-minded Hebrew would dare debate this proposition in Jesus' day (22:41ff.). Then-current Judaism, in fact, expected a personal Messiah to be born in a given town and of a prophetically indicated parentage (Matt. 23:6; John 7:41f.).

- B. Can the sure oath of God to David fail to establish one of his descendants upon the throne (II Sam. 7:11-16; Ps. 132:11-18)?

III. THE SON OF DAVID WILL BE A LITERAL BABY

- A. If the Christ must be born of the lineage of David, how could this occur, unless He were a perfectly normal, human BABY, although he be the royal child? Does Messiahship, or birth in to David's family, somehow exempt "the Son of David" from being someone's little boy? Whatever else may be affirmed of Him, should not Messiah of all people, be authentically HUMAN, born of human parentage? Could anyone doubt that the "Child born to us" to reign on David's throne (Isa. 9:6f.), the son of the virgin (Isa. 7:14), must be genuinely MAN, i.e. fully human?
- B. And if He must be the Ideal Man, should He not be born a common Baby, so as to identify perfectly with His people of whom He would be the true, typical representative?

IV. BUT A BABY IS MAN AT HIS WEAKEST

- A. Even though He be the Son of David and future Messiah, how could (= why should) this baby be exempt from all the usual, negative aspects of the human condition? If Jewish theologians cannot conceive of the great "Son of David" as appearing on earth in so inglorious a form as that of a little baby, they must be taught that, despite the striking insignificance of Man, God entrust to HIM the gigantic task of administration of the world to come. (This concept is developed by Paul; Heb. 2:6ff.; I Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:22). If man's common humanness be construed as a stumbling block and a cause for the disgrace of disqualification for God's great work, let it be remembered that man IN HIMSELF is nothing.
- B. Here, then, is David's original understanding expressed in Psalm 8. The Psalm's theme is: "God's Glory Revealed in His Glorification of Man," a theme developed in three steps:
1. Man's comparative frailty is evident in his microscopic insignificance in contrast to the magnitude of God's heavens (Ps. 8:3, 4).

2. Man's conferred dignity is evidence that any greatness he enjoys has been granted him by God (Ps. 8:5).
 - a. God made man just lower than Heavenly Beings.
 - b. God crowned man with glory and honor.
 3. Man's constituted authority, as seen in his influence over the rest of earth's creatures, is also God's gift (Ps. 8:6-8).
- C. Therefore, God's glorification of Man forever proves that any dignity and importance we attribute to man is contingent, not absolute; conferred, not earned. For the Psalmist, if there is anything great about man, it is because God graciously conferred it on him. There is nothing inherent in man—either in his native or his acquired abilities or in his personal or group achievements—that qualifies him for such an exalted position. Man's greatness is the unmerited gift from GOD. Human dignity has no reality or meaning, except as it finds these in God's gracious purpose for delegating it to him.
- D. Therefore, if the Son of David must be a little baby, man at his weakest, it is not unthinkable that Messianic royalty should be conferred upon him, despite his apparent weaknesses and lack of qualification in the judgment of the great of earth.
- E. If this proposition seems threatening, because babyhood is the nadir experience of human weakness, the tension is resolved by the glorious truth of the proposition which follows:

V. BUT MAN AT HIS WEAKEST IS GOD'S NORMAL INSTRUMENT (Psalm 8)

- A. The theme of Psalm 8 is introduced by a principle that explains why God should choose to elevate man to such exceptional dignity: although our Lord possesses all majesty in heaven and on earth, He has chosen to deal with His opposers and enemies, not by some personal feat of heavenly might, but by using MAN to do it (Ps. 8:1f.). To rule the world and still His enemies, our God needs only that power available in His effective use of what all would deem to be absurdly inadequate means, e.g. human beings. (Cf. the voices of children versus God's mighty enemies, Ps. 8:2;

puny man versus the total creation, vv. 3-8.) And, because this Psalm essentially summarizes Genesis 1 and 2, we understand that this concept is God's typical procedure, not the exception. God glorifies His name and humiliates His enemies and He utilizes firepower no more formidable than the spontaneous praise of those who are little better than BABES;

- B. The Psalm establishes God's normal procedure: He delights to display His greatness by making skillful use of absurdly feeble instruments to produce incredible effective results. Therefore, human depreciation of any of God's servants or means, based on what proud mortals may eventually think of His servants' apparent unworthiness, insignificance or obscurity, is absolutely no indication of their usefulness or worth to God. Whom God qualifies for His service is qualified, whether haughty sinners admit it or not! And God can enable him to succeed mightily at the task to which He sets him.
- C. From the foregoing premises, it is now possible to see the point of Jesus' implied conclusion:

VI. THEREFORE, A FULLY HUMAN, APPARENTLY FEEBLE MESSIAH IS NOT INCONCEIVABLE, BUT EVEN HIGHLY PROBABLE, BECAUSE FULLY VINDICATED BY SCRIPTURE (Psalm 8).

- A. The stumbling block for the theologians was not the humanness of the Messiah but that God could have sent so glorious a Christ in so inglorious a form! Because Psalm 8 speaks of the high irony of God's planning, should not Jesus' objectors reread it to understand that God has always used what is insignificant in man's eyes to bring Himself glory? (A not unknown principle: I Cor. 1:18-31; Matt. 11:25; II Cor. 12:7-10. Remember David's defeat of Goliath.)
- B. By citing Psalm 8, Jesus dispatched the priests' implied arguments by teaching them to see God's normative use of common MEN, not supermen or angels, to praise Him and rule the earth. If the philosophical antisupeaturalism of the Sadducean chief priests keeps them from accepting Jesus' claims to be God's Son, therefore, in some sense, deity, then let them consider Him as a MAN! But let them do this in the light of God's purpose for Man as this is revealed in Scripture!

- C. By citing Psalm 8 in defense of the children's ascription of Messiahship to Him, Jesus implies that the long-awaited Christ, David's Son, must be fully MAN, even man at his weakest, a little baby. Because of these leaders' preconceptions as to what God's Kingdom and Messiah must be, they had lost their ability to look objectively at ANY man to wonder how God could use that man to glorify Himself. Had they looked at Jesus in this light, they would have been able to see those supernatural credentials which indisputably signalled God's stamp of approval upon Him as true "Son of David." By thinking that common humanness is unimportant as a proper condition of Messiahship, they also missed seeing the glorious condescension of God who, in the mortal clay of Jesus, prepared to conquer the Evil One. So, His very obvious humanness and lack of qualification in the eyes of His critics, should have been an argument for joining the children in praising God for giving such authority to MEN! (Cf. Matt. 9:8.) This is why the objection that, because Jesus seemed to them but a mere man He could not qualify to be "Son of David," is itself inappropriate. After all, could the Word of God (Psalm 8) be thought to have failed in its promise that, somehow, some MAN would bring to completion God's plan?
- D. By quoting Psalm 8, Jesus directed His questioners to check out His other qualifications, since David taught that whomsoever God elevates to high dignity is thereby qualified by His sovereign grace, and all previous estimates of THAT man's unworthiness must be revised! Let the chief priests quietly reflect upon His works, His character and His results. Even if they choked on His claims, upon reflection they might yet see how truly all that He did praised God.

From this standpoint, then, Psalm 8 contains no direct or unique reference either to the Messiah or to the little children's praising Him. Rather, it contained the principle: "God's glory is revealed in His glorification of Man," a principle most appropriately applicable to Jesus as Messiah. In fact, man's highest dignity and actual universal dominion over the earth would be realized only in Him (Heb. 2:6ff.; I Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:22). From this perspective, Jesus Himself was one such "little child," whose natural weakness God would turn into sufficient strength to defeat His enemies and silence the revengeful,

rule the earth and glorify God. (Cf. Rev. 12:5; 17:14 as pictorial representation of this same truth: it is the Lamb, not the great dragon or the beasts, that conquers!)

Because Psalm 8 is not strictly Messianic, it is of much wider application. In fact, the short-sighted chief priests, by despising the children's praise, failed to understand that those feeble adorers of God, whose childlike affirmations of faith in God's Christ were real, were even then effectively defeating God's adversaries. How did they do this?

1. God was proving to sceptics that humble, teachable people can actually see what is objectively "there," i.e. Jesus' true Messiahship. These children, untrammelled by prejudice and tradition, let themselves be completely convinced by the impression Jesus produced on their minds, whereas the Sadducean high priests' minds were bogged down in rationalizations and biased misjudgments. However keen their intellect, these men of corrupt heart could look upon the Son of David in person and yet not discern His true identity nor glorify God for it! But their numerous doubts and cynical criticisms were devastated by the guileless, spontaneous confession of love and trust by these children. The unfeigned purity of feeling expressed in the chanting of these children warmed Jesus, and proved that ALL men COULD HAVE recognized and praised Him as did they. At the same time it condemned ("silenced" Ps. 8:2) those who not only would not worship Him, but, worse, began to plot His murder.
2. The "little children" concept in Scripture is God's normal procedure. Therefore, the scribes' estimations of what is required to establish the great Messianic Kingdom are all miscalculations. If God can take what appears to be a common Galilean, Jesus of Nazareth, and utilize Him to do all that is involved in being "the Son of David," if one day God will vindicate the rightness of the little children's praise over against the established conclusions of theological scholarship of that day, if He can transform simple fishermen and taxcollectors, farmers and housewives into frontline troops to bring about the subjugation of the earth, then God is acting as He always has and His Kingdom is right on course! (I Cor. 1:18-31).
 - a. The Messiah's Kingdom, for its advancement, needs no more formidable weaponry than that strength wielded by common believers so despised by worldlings enamored with the usual arms of "manly" warfare. (Cf. II Cor. 3:4-6; 4:7; 10:3-5; 12:8.)

- b. God's choice of adults, who are hardly better than little children, to promote the progress of His Kingdom, is ample proof of His real control over it. (Study notes on Matt. 11:25f.; 18:3f.) To defeat the awful power of evil, God maneuvers only the awesome might of the meek! (21:5, the Messianic King; 11:29).
3. Jesus' own program for world conquest is also in Psalm 8, as He too had already made the "little children" concept His own. He knew that the best kind of praise and service to God is that which comes from simple, sincere people who can receive from God without judging Him or having to tell Him what He can or cannot do. Since ordinary people, who did not count for much on the social scale, recognized and praised Jesus at a time when their great ones refused to do so, in God's eyes they condemned the angry arrogance of His opposition. Those who glorify human accomplishments, who seek and give human praise, and who continue to reject our Lord Jesus Christ, do not deserve to be made citizens of God's Kingdom. And they shall not have it! (Luke 12:32). In short, the followers of Jesus, the CHURCH, is really the sort of Messianic program that God has always had in mind. The great God of heavenly armies would perfect His praise, not by some dazzling display of divine power nor by the eloquence of great, wise or learned men of earth—as men expect Him to—, but by the effective use of sincere, humble people who can speak His truth taught them by Jesus! According to Jesus, as the old hymn has it,

Not with swords' loud clashing
Nor roll of stirring drums
With deeds of love and mercy
The heavenly Kingdom comes.

4. To recognize and praise God's Christ is to recognize and praise God Himself (John 5:22f.; Matt. 10:40; Luke 10:16). The enthusiasm of the children who praised Jesus, in essence, said that God had marvellously succeeded in bringing His Anointed into the world. So God received glory as truly from these irrepressible little boys as from choirs of angels around His throne, and should not Jesus defend them? And should not the most fitting setting for it be God's House?
5. Even if someone noticed that Psalm 8 spoke directly of children's praising the LORD, whereas Jesus cited it to defend children's praising Himself, His citation is legitimate, because, in a very true sense, Jesus is really Jahweh come to earth as a genuine human

being to subject all things to Himself (Matt. 1:23; Phil. 2:5-7; John 1:1, 14, 18). Since Jesus had already furnished ample proof that His claims to deity are all true, the burden of proof to the contrary lay on those who denied it. (For His claims, see notes on 11:27; for His proofs, think of John 10:37f.; 14:10f. and 3:2.)

VI. A RETREAT FOR REFLECTION AND REST

21:17 And he left them and went forth out of the city to Bethany and lodged there. Because Matthew used a participle (*katalipòn*, here rendered "left"), which may just as easily be a circumstantial temporal participle subordinate to the main verb (*exêlthen*, "went forth"), it may be rendered "when He left them, He went forth." There is therefore no contradiction with Mark's information that the Lord actually left the temple much later that day (Mark 11:19). Yet, *katalipòn* has something of the flavor of "to abandon, leave to one's destiny," (Rocci, 989). So it is not mistaken to see the Lord as having verbally silenced His critics with a deft parry from Scripture, then turning on His heel, leaving them to ponder His words (cf. Matt. 16:4b). Although *he left* the chief priests and scribes fuming, the crowds stayed right with Him, because the rest of that day was given over to teaching on such a popular level that literally hundreds of people crowded around Him to absorb His lessons (Mark 11:18; Luke 19:48).

He went forth out of the city for several possible reasons:

1. The city of Jerusalem, during Passover week, teemed with pilgrims, as the entire Jewish nation gathered for the feast, bringing in tourists from all over the Mediterranean world. Edersheim (*Temple*, 31), citing Tacitus, affirmed that within the city dwelt a population of 600,000 people, but which, according to Josephus, swelled to a figure between two and three million at feast time. The conditions in the crowded metropolis pushed rabbis to declare that, during the feasts—except on the first night—the people might camp outside the city, however within the limits of a sabbath-day's journey. Hence, hospitality outside the crowded, noisy city would bring welcome rest to the Savior.
2. Further, **he went forth . . . to Bethany and lodged there**, not unlikely because His three friends of Bethany, who had hosted Him on many other occasions, would perhaps insist that He lodge with them again (cf. Luke 10:38ff.; John 11:2f.; 12:1-8; Matt. 26:6-13).

Bethany, in fact, being just over the Mount of Olives 3 km (under 2 mi.) to the east of the city (John 11:18), on the eastern slope of the mount (cf. Luke 24:50 with Acts 1:12), furnished a handy base to and from which He could commute everyday to Jerusalem, returning each evening (Luke 21:37f.; Mark 11:11, 12, 15, 19, 20, 27).

3. Another possible reason for spending the nights outside Jerusalem was Jesus' own use of proper caution. Even though He was perfectly confident that none could really arrest Him until the hour assigned for it by God, He prudently avoided their clutches by staying just out of their immediate reach.

WHY DID JESUS PURIFY THE TEMPLE?

This is Phase II of the Messianic Offensive. Jesus' assault on Jerusalem began with the Messianic "triumphal entry." This is proved by Matthew's direct connection drawn between the temple-cleansing with the bold Messianic declaration made during the entry. Jesus recognized that the real enemy of Israel was not Rome. His strategy, therefore, lay not in political or military power struggles, but in making men pure before God; He attacked the real enemy, Satan, not the apparent foe, the State. Israel, He sees, must be freed, not from occupation to soldiers, but from preoccupation with sin.

1. Was Jesus' purpose merely to criticize the hypocritical worship of the temple's custodians, who, on the excuse of honoring God, turned it into a source of financial advantage for themselves? This certainly harmonizes with the position occupied by the ancient prophets. In fact, Jesus stands impressively and solidly in the great prophetic tradition and fully supports all that His predecessors had decried. He would therefore need no further vindication of His actions.

To those who question the permanent good done by His mechanical purification of the temple if He cleansed not their hearts, thus stopping the external abuse while leaving their wicked mentality, let it be answered that He justified His deed by appeal to the Law and the Prophets. If people could be made sensitive to the divine authority of these, perhaps they could also be led to acknowledge their need for repentance and be brought all the way to confess Him whom God sent.

2. Is there DEITY implied here? Since Jesus had connected the ministry of John the Baptist with the prophecy of Malachi 3 (Matt.

11:10, 14), and since John was the messenger to appear just before the Lord Himself should suddenly appear in His temple to purify, should not the whole, complex event of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem, and particularly in the temple to cleanse it, be seen as a fulfilment of Malachi's prophecy? But would the reader have drawn this conclusion from such distant premises? Nevertheless, Matthew's deliberate connection of the temple cleansing with the Messianic Entry of Israel's divine King (cf. 21:4f. and Zech. 9:9) intends to interpret this temple cleansing in terms of Jesus' divine dignity. In light of Zechariah 9:9, Jesus acted out the Messianic symbolism. He expressed His justice by refusing to tolerate the profaning of God's House. He showed His meekness and victory by healing the blind and lame and by accepting the evidence of how deeply His influence had penetrated the masses of Israel by justifying the praise of those who are often last of all to be affected by intellectual choices, the children. While He did not defend His actions as evidence of His essential Sonship (as in the case of the first cleansing, John 2:16: "my Father's house"), His deeds are not inconsistent with it. Rather, they are what we might expect of One fully conscious of His Sonship. His felt consciousness of deity and sovereignty over the temple did not have to be stated as the basis of His actions. This could be amply demonstrated in His own place for teaching and healing. Nevertheless, because we have already seen that in Jesus Christ we have "something greater than the temple" (12:6), we are already prepared psychologically to see it as part of Jesus' Messianic symbolism to claim Lordship over the temple by restoring it to its right use.

3. Or is this gesture a visual announcement that God is about to abandon the temple, leaving it and its hypocritical worshippers to the natural consequences of His abandoning their house which they so flagrantly abused and polluted (23:38)? From this standpoint, His gesture is more than merely symbolic Messianism. It is the sentence of a holy God who cleanses His own House one last time in vigorous protest against its repulsive sordidness, to show His justification for abandoning it altogether later.

The judgment that occurred symbolically in the condemnation of the leafy, but unfruitful, fig tree, is repeated even more clearly in the judgment upon the nation's authorities. Like the barren fig tree, the important question and sole justification for the temple's continued existence, was its real usefulness. It is NOW

performing the task for which it was created? If not, it must be cleansed or pruned a year or so, and then eliminated (cf. Luke 13:6-9).

4. His act is concretely practical. Like a snowplow laboring to reach isolated communities starving for essential provisions for life, Jesus was bull-dozing aside all that hindered needy Gentiles from reaching the life-giving God of Israel. All that blocked access to God must be ruthlessly removed, regardless of the apparent validity of the rationalizations used to justify it.

Could there be any connection between this cleansing of the temple and the fact that various religious groups, notably the Essene community, were out of fellowship with the temple and refused it because of the corrupt priesthood and the profaned worship that took place there? (Cf. Maggioni, *Luca*, 247.) They affirmed that the true temple was the community, especially theirs, and that true worship was a godly life and observance of the law (without temple observances, of course). For these Hebrew monks, however, the temple had to be replaced by a pure community, because the former had been profaned. But Jesus shows the Essenes to be mistaken, because, so long as the Jerusalem temple stood, it was the true route of access to God and might not be substituted until God's purposes for its existence had been realized. Rather than substitute something else for it, He cleansed it.

Jesus desired to prepare God's House once more for use as a TEMPLE, where silence and orderliness facilitated reverent worship or teaching. The uproar of the market made prayer impossible, so the people of God effectually robbed the humble, seeking Gentiles of their opportunity to satisfy the haunting longing of their soul by prayer in a suitable atmosphere conducive to access to the living God. Was it likely that the prayer of Psalm 67 could be prayed or answered?

5. Why cleanse the temple? Because it was Passover! If there ever were a time when preparation for the Feast of Unleavened Bread should include the elimination of the old leaven, it was now. Jesus must sweep away all the old leaven of human selfishness, the meaningless external observances and the private interest linked with money and power, all flourishing at the expense of zeal for God's House (cf. I Cor. 5:6-8).

FACT QUESTIONS

1. According to Mark, from where were Jesus and His disciples coming when they entered the temple?
2. Whom did Jesus find in the temple that should not have been there?
3. In precisely what part of the temple was the abuse taking place? How do you know?
4. Why were these people there? Did they supply a need for the worshippers? If so, what?
5. What was so wrong about what was done by the people Jesus drove out of the temple?
6. Name some Old Testament heroes who had taken similar vigorous action to protect the holiness of God and that which had been dedicated to Him?
7. According to Mark, Jesus took the offensive not only against the sellers and moneychangers, but also against others. Who were these and why did Jesus attack them too?
8. What two passages of Scripture did Jesus cite to justify His actions?
9. What are the similarities and differences between John's account of the temple cleansing and those of Matthew, Mark and Luke (cf. John 2:13-25)?
10. What effect did the temple cleansing have upon the chief priests and scribes?
11. What effect did it have upon the simple, common people?
12. After the cleansing of the temple, who approached Jesus to be helped by Him? What sort of help did they seek?
13. Who continued to keep up the popular enthusiasm expressed during the triumphal entry the day before? What slogans were being shouted? What did the words mean?
14. What was the basis of the objections the religious authorities raised to the cries of the children?
15. What answer did Jesus give to justify what the children were saying? Where did He get His answer? What did He mean to communicate by it?
16. Where did Jesus go after the cleansing of the temple?
17. How did Jesus busy Himself for the rest of the day in the temple after cleansing it (Luke 19:47f.; Mark 11:18).
18. According to Mark and Luke, how did the rulers of the people react to Jesus' bold defense of His cleansing the temple?

19. According to Mark and Luke, how did the common people react to Jesus?
20. Where did Jesus go to spend the night? Who else lived there? When had He been there before? What else took place there connected with the life of Jesus?

SECTION 56

JESUS CURSES FIG TREE AND TEACHES DISCIPLES FAITH

(Parallel: Mark 11:12-14, 20-25)

TEXT: 21:18-22

18 Now in the morning as he returned to the city, he hungered.
19 And seeing a fig tree by the way side, he came to it, and found nothing thereon, but leaves only; and he saith unto it, Let there be no fruit from thee henceforward for ever. And immediately the fig tree withered away.

20 And when the disciples saw it, they marvelled, saying, How did the fig tree immediately wither away?

21 And Jesus answered and said unto them, Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do what is done to the fig tree, but even if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou taken up and cast into the sea, it shall be done. 22 And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. If Matthew knew quite well that the cursing of the fig tree preceded the cleansing of the temple, rather than vice versa, what motives could have seemed valid to him to invert the chronological order of these events?
- b. If Jesus is the Son of God, or God incarnate as the Christians say, why was He hungry? Does God get hungry?!
- c. If Jesus is the Son of God, why did He approach the tree, as Mark admits, "to see if he could find anything on it"? Could he not have already known everything about it by using His presumed prophetic intuition? Should not the fact that He was disappointed by the tree be considered evidence against His possessing supernatural knowledge? If not, why not?
- d. By what right does Jesus permit Himself to gather fruit from a tree that does not belong to Him? What does the Law of Moses

say about this? Is He guilty of theft or presumption, according to Jewish law?

- e. If Mark affirms that “it was not the season for figs” (Mark 11:13), why should Jesus have any right to expect fruit on that tree? Is it not unfair on His part to expect a tree to do what it cannot?
- f. On the basis of what facts could we be sure that Jesus COULD have known that the tree had not produced the figs He expected to find there?
- g. On what basis could He have been certain that it would never produce them in the future?
- h. If this tree belonged to someone, by what right does Jesus destroy the property of others? Or, if the tree does not belong to Him and actually is someone else’s property, how is He actually helping that owner by His action?
- i. By what right can Jesus curse, and so destroy, this “unfortunate” fig tree? Is it a morally conscious being, capable of sinning by not bearing fruit? What had it done to deserve the severity of Jesus’ cursing?
- j. If “the fig tree withered at once,” as Matthew says, why did not the disciples notice it until the next day, as Mark affirms?
- k. Why did the disciples marvel? Should they not have already become thoroughly accustomed to Jesus’ miracles by now?
- l. What is the relationship between a fig tree cursed because it did not bear fruit worthy of its own nature, and prayer that is so effective that does “impossible” things? Jesus’ statement seems to draw such a connection. What is it?
- m. In your opinion, does Jesus offer Himself as a model for the disciples, in the sense that the disciple should be able to wither fig trees like Jesus did? If not, what is the lesson? If so, how many fig trees have you blasted lately?
- n. Men rightly believe that Jesus never showed a mean, selfish spirit. Yet, how are we to understand this incident? Why did He curse the fig tree, if not because He was in a fit of frustrated anger because this tree did not furnish Him what He wanted?
- o. Was Jesus’ promise of moving mountains by faith intended for every disciple, or only for the Twelve? On what basis do you decide this?
- p. What limitations does Jesus place upon His seemingly universal promise to move mountains for any disciple who asks it of Him in faithful prayer?

- q. How does the text help us to understand what attitude we should have when we seek a supernatural (miraculous) blessing from God?
- r. In what sense is it true that Mark's additions concerning forgiveness (Mark 11:25) are implicitly included in Matthew's general statement, "Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith"?
- s. Affirm or deny and tell why: "The narration of the cursing of the fig tree in this context had the precise function of explaining the sterility of Judaism and of foretelling its proper destiny."

PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Early on the day following the triumphal entry, as Jesus and His disciples were on their way back to the city from Bethany, He felt hungry. In the distance He noticed one solitary fig tree completely leafed out close to the road. So He went up to it to see if He could find anything on it. But when He arrived at the tree, He found nothing on it except leaves. In fact, it was not yet the season for figs.

Then He said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" May you never bear fruit again!" His disciples were listening. And the fig tree began at once to wither. Then they arrived in Jerusalem and He entered the temple and began to drive out the merchants. . . .

Early the next morning, as they took the same route as the previous day, they saw the fig tree now completely withered away from the roots up. Then Peter, recalling Jesus' words the day before, exclaimed, "Rabbi, look! That fig tree you cursed has dried up!" When the disciples saw it, they exclaimed in astonishment, "How fast it withered!"

"Have faith in God," Jesus urged them, "I can assure you that, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree. In fact, if you order even this mountain, "Go throw yourself into the sea," without any mental reservations or inward doubts, but believing that what you say will occur, it will be done for you. This is why I tell you that whatever you pray for, act on the assumption that it is already received, and it will be yours! Further, when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your heavenly Father may forgive you your sins."

And they came again into Jerusalem. . . .

SUMMARY

Before cleansing a pretentious temple that served an equally pretentious nation not producing the fruit of righteousness that God the Creator rightly expected of both, Jesus transformed an otherwise commonplace situation into a grave object lesson full of warning. If a fruitless fig tree deserves to be blasted instantly, what fate must await an unbelieving, prayerless, merciless people that, despite all pretensions to the contrary, has made great promises without performance of that one great duty for which it was created, as surely as a fig tree was created to produce figs?!

NOTES

I. PUNISHMENT FROM GOD FOR HYPOCRISY AND BARRENNESS (21:18f.)

A. The Sterile Fig Tree

21:18 Now in the morning as he returned to the city, he hungered. In the morning means "early" (*proi*), referring to the time of day, not necessarily, as in English, "the next day after today" (Greek; *epaurion*; cf. *proi skotias eti oules* of John 20:1: "early while it was yet dark"). Matthew affirms nothing about chronological sequences. This fact resolves any supposed contradiction between Matthew and Mark regarding the sequence of the events of this chapter. In fact, Mark clarifies the chronology by using the more precise time connection "on the following day" (*epaurion*) "tomorrow, the next day" (Arndt-Gingrich, 283). Thus, Matthew affirms only what time it was when Jesus cursed the tree, without saying on what day it occurred. Mark's chronology clearly notes that the cursing took place on the day after the Messianic Entry into Jerusalem, i.e. very early Monday morning.

As he returned to the city, then, shows that Jesus was coming from Bethany to Jerusalem to cleanse the temple, teach and heal, after spending the night there with the Twelve. (See notes on 12:17; Mark 11:11.) Apparently, He did this every day, since people got up early to hear Him (Luke 21:37f.).

He hungered. (See notes on 8:26.) As is evident from the sequence of events recorded by Mark (11:12-15), Jesus was leading the Twelve to the temple before breakfast. Apparently, He had not eaten in

Bethany before leaving, and so *was hungry*. Because skeptics find it incredible that hospitable people like Mary and Martha should have permitted Him to miss breakfast, we furnish several possible reasons why He might have done so:

1. Had He risen before the others, to go out to pray? (Cf. Mark 1:35.) Had they arisen later, eaten and then joined Him to go to Jerusalem? This would explain why no mention is made of the Apostles' hunger. Again, all 13 men might not have slept together in the one house of Lazarus, Mary and Martha, but in several homes in Bethany, or elsewhere.

Farrar (*Life*, 509, note 1) poses the interesting question whether Jesus really slept in the town of Bethany:

The *eulisthe ekei* of Matthew 21:17 does not *necessarily* imply that He bivouacked in the open air. It is, however, very probable that He did so; for (1) such is the proper meaning of the word (comp. Judg. 19:15, 20). (2) St. Luke says, *eulizeto eis tò òros tò kaloùmenon* (21:37). (3) It was His custom to resort for the night to Gethsemane, where, so far as we are aware, there was no house. (4) The retiring to Bethany would hardly answer to the *ekrùbe ap' autôn* of John 12:36.

He concludes that Jesus probably did not actually stay in the village since His purpose appears to have been concealment, which would hardly have been realized by retiring in the famous house where so many had observed Him at supper earlier. So, if He and the Apostles, slept on the slopes of Olivet near Bethany, the problem of breakfast is to be solved precisely like Jesus started to solve it, by finding it wherever He could.

2. Concern to go to the temple at an early hour to catch the traders at their game, may have pushed Him to leave Bethany before breakfast. Although Jesus enjoyed a good meal on many occasions (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:33f.) with Pharisees (Luke 14:1ff.) and publicans and sinners (Luke 15:1ff.), the pressure of His activities sometimes left Him little time to eat. (Cf. Mark 6:31.)

Let scoffers sneer at this hungry Messiah! For the believer, this characteristic evidences His authentic humanity. He is truly the Son of man and very much like His brethren in this basic physiological

need. And yet, side by side with this demonstration of Jesus' complete humanness, His hunger, we see His divine power in the instant withering of the fig tree by a simple word of divine might.

21:19 And seeing a fig tree by the way side. When Jesus first noticed it, it was at a distance (Mark 11:13), but, because it was close to the road (Matthew has: *epì tês hodoû*), it practically invited the hungry passerby to sample its fruit. God Himself had already solved the ethical question whether anyone should pick fruit from others' trees without first asking permission (Deut. 23:24f.). In fact, after the first picking of fruit, anything remaining over must be left on the tree or in the field expressly for the alien, the fatherless and the widow (Deut. 24:19ff.).

He came to it "to see if He could find anything on it" (Mark 11:13). Apparently Jesus did not use His supernatural insight to learn at a distance whether there were fruit there or not. That He could choose not to know certain things should cause no surprise for anyone aware of His unique Sonship. Jesus, when He discovered the things He chose not to know in advance, could be surprised. (See notes on 8:10 and 24:36.) In fact, He approached the tree expecting to taste of the fruit which must surely be on it, since it was "in leaf" (Mark 11:13). It is a false assumption that "our Lord knew, as by His divine power He must, that there was no fruit upon that tree." By starting with this false premise, one must defend Jesus' apparent insincerity when He approached the tree, "playing like" He expected fruit, when, in reality, He knew there was none. On the other hand, substitute this premise with the alternative hypothesis that our Lord **CHOSE NOT TO KNOW** about the tree by supernatural knowledge, and any need to excuse His supposed "insincerity" is eliminated.

He found nothing thereon, but leaves only. Mark 11:13 adds the cryptic phrase: "for it was not the season for figs." In fact, Passover time is near the beginning of spring, whereas the normal "season for figs" is much later on in the summer. Note carefully that Mark relates that "He went to see if He could find ANYTHING (*ti*) on it."

1. Mark's statement that "it was not the season for figs" is obviously not included to suggest that Jesus' conduct was either immoral or irrational, as if Jesus blasted a tree incapable of producing what He (wrongly) expected of it. Mark should be treated as an intelligent, believing writer who could have discerned such an incongruity, had it really existed.

Ferrar (*Life*, 511), citing Josephus (*Wars*, III,10,8), suggested:

On the plains of Gennesaret Jesus must have been accustomed to see figs ripe on the trees every month of the year excepting January and February.

However, Mark's comment on the season renders invalid any hope of finding ripe figs on the tree, since Mark is discussing the growing season for the JERUSALEM area, of which he, quite possibly, was a native, (cf. Acts 12:12).

Rather, by using this expression, Mark shows that Jesus was NOT looking for ripe figs, matured that spring, but for something (*ti*) else. What was He seeking then?

2. Autumn figs from the previous year? Pliny's *Natural History*, 16, 27, describes these late fruits that not uncommonly continued on the trees throughout the winter, even till the arrival of the green leaves of spring. This possibility, however, is less likely than the following, because the tree's proximity to a large population center would have almost guaranteed that all winter figs would have probably been picked by passersby or blown off by the wind (cf. Rev. 6:13).
3. Jesus sought flower figs, the "first figs" or "green figs." (Study Isa. 28:4; Jer. 24:1-3; Hos. 9:10; Mic. 7:1; Nah. 3:12.) This "early fruit" is formed in the springtime (S. of Sol. 2:10-13). In reality, such young fruit is the blossom and appears before the leaves open.

The fruit is of so anomalous a construction that botanists have had to give it a distinct name and place among fruits. It is a hollow receptacle, with minute flowers on its inner side, which later produce the true fruit (*Davis Dictionary of the Bible*, 231).

Edersheim (*Life*, II, 374f.) reminds that the Mishnah (Shebh. iv.7) and the Talmud (Jer. Shebh. 35b, last lines) confirm the fact "that the unripe fruit was eaten, as soon as it began to assume a red color."

Jesus was hoping to find some flower-figs to eat. But as sure as the law: "no flowers, no fruit," He knew, as does any fig grower, that, because there were no flower-figs, there was also not going to be any fig production later on in August.

Nothing but leaves. Leaves were the signal to all that something edible should have been found on that tree. Jesus would not have even bothered, had it not been for that deceptive foliage announcing to any that know fig trees that something to stave off His hunger

was to be found there—if not old figs, at least edible, blossom figs. But to affirm, with McGarvey (*Fourfold Gospel*, 581), that “it was too early for leaves,” is to ignore the nature of that species of fig fully leafed out in precisely that locality in that year.

And He said to it, “May no fruit ever come from you again.”

Mark’s expression “He answered and said to it” (Mark 11:14 *apokritheis eîpen autê*) may be nothing more than a typically Aramaic redundancy (Blass-Debrunner, §4, note 4) and should be left untranslated in English (Arndt-Gingrich, 93), being but a standard formula. Jesus is not, therefore, formally answering the supposed claims which the tree made by its leaves.

That Jesus should address a tree is no surprise to anyone who knows our God who can merely speak a word to His creation and things begin to occur (Gen. 1:22; 3:14). In fact, to see Jesus addressing a sea storm to quiet it, is to witness the same phenomenon. (See notes on 8:26.) The greater surprise is to hear Jesus attribute moral responsibility to the tree. Some object that to treat an impersonal object as something properly subject to punishment or reward is itself an injustice, an observation that causes many either to reject the account as unhistorical, or else reduce it to an entirely parabolic symbol. Three answers are possible:

1. The error lies in man’s failure to understand God’s creation. Morality, by God’s definition, is to function according to His design for our nature and in harmony with the purpose for which we were all created, be we trees or men. Not to do so is immoral and blameworthy. God’s will and design for trees is that each produce “fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds” (Gen. 1:11). Further, such fruit was to serve as man’s food (Gen. 1:29). Therefore, Jesus could justly impute guilt to a tree, however impersonal it might be, because its barrenness did not fulfil the law of its life by responding positively to God’s will that governs the tree’s nature.
2. Under what circumstances would it ever be considered criminal to eliminate a worthless tree?

For example, on what basis could the farmer, in the story of the unfruitful fig tree, be accused of malice or uncultured spite and impatience, when, disappointed by his fig tree’s uselessness, ordered it to be “cut down lest it continue to use up the soil” (Luke 13:7)?

If there is no such case, then should it be thought somehow MORE criminal to remove it by supernatural, rather than by natural, means?

3. Even those who complain about Jesus' attribution of moral responsibility to a tree are often caught doing a similar thing when they talk to inanimate objects, such as those choice remarks aimed at some object of their pleasure or displeasure, their comments addressed to their automobile when it refuses to start on a cold morning and they are late to work, their verbally coaxing a golf ball across the green and into the cup, etc. The difference is that, while they say such things without seriously believing their comments can change anything, Jesus not only said what He thought, but also radically proved His right to say it by changing the state of the object so addressed!

Further, to assume that the fig tree belonged to a local farmer and should not, therefore, have been presumptuously destroyed by Jesus, assumes more than the text affirms.

1. The observation that the tree was located "by the road" (21:19) argues that it was not located in a field, hence really belonged to nobody, was part of no one's patrimony. Jesus neither impoverished nor robbed any man, therefore.
2. Further, by reducing the barren fig tree to instant firewood, Jesus has done any presumed owner a favor, since the tree was good for nothing else.
3. BUT WHO IS THE REAL OWNER OF THAT TREE—and of every other tree on earth, if not Jesus the Lord? Can HE not do with HIS OWN what He wills?!

Let there be no fruit from thee henceforward for ever. Since He had found no flower-figs, He knew that there could be no future fruit-figs. He merely acknowledged that fig tree's condition as barren and, by His utterance, sealed that condition forever. Its time for fruit-bearing had passed. It had been found useless to God and man. Now its judgment and sentencing had come. Two reasons have been noticed that justify Jesus' judgment: the tree's fruitfulness and its falsity.

1. For fruitlessness, because it was contrary to its God-given nature.
2. For pretending, by means of its deceptive leaves, that it had already fulfilled its God-given mission in the world, i.e. to bear fruit. Its external expression was untrue to its inner life.

Jesus' reaction was no precipitous, pettish outburst, but a solemn judgment carefully announced and instantly carried out. If it be true that usefulness to God and men is the only justification for existence on earth, and if the function of justice is to eliminate anything or any person not fulfilling the end for which it was designed, then the justice of Jesus, in preparing this fig tree for removal, is fully justified.

Further, on the basis of Jesus' later explanations (21:20-22), are we to infer that His curse involved His own full confidence that God would execute what Jesus here simply addressed to the fig tree? Yes, because that demonstration of absolute trust which He requires of His followers is exemplified in His own total dependence upon and confidence in the Father at every point. He verbally withered the fig tree in the undivided certainty that it was God's will and that God's power could effect it.

And immediately the fig tree withered away. Matthew's abbreviated account conveys the impression that, even as they watched, the fig tree wilted. Mark's more definite account notes that "the fig tree withered away from its roots" (Mark 11:20). So Matthew is correct to affirm that the **tree withered away immediately**, since the withering began immediately at the roots, but the effect on the branches and leaves would not necessarily have been instantly evident as, in fact, it was the next day. **Immediately** (*parachrêma*), then, does not necessarily mean "in their presence while they were looking," but "relatively soon," since the antithesis of *immediately* would be the slow-motion decay of a degenerate tree.

WHY DID JESUS WITHER JUST THIS ONE TREE?

Were there no other fruitless trees, plants, animals and even people all over Palestine, not to say, the entire world? If so, then why single out this one single fig for exemplary punishment for its fruitlessness?

On the principle of the parsimony of miracles, He probably would not have blasted more than this one encountered in the direct course of His earthly ministry. This differs not at all from His refusal to cure all the sick, raise all the dead or feed all the hungry in Palestine. He dealt with those He encountered and chose to bless; the rest He left. In His ministry it is not recorded that He ever encountered another similar fig tree out of which He chose to make a lesson on faith versus fruitlessness.

But, could He not simply have gone on to search for fruit on other trees? Or perhaps more wonderfully, He could have caused mature

figs to appear on this tree already so rich in leaves. He could have then eaten those. But He did not. Why?

1. He refused to use His divine power for selfish purposes, as during the temptations in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11).
2. Every object in God's universe occupies its place (1) by His grace and (2) for His glory (Col. 1:16f.). Nothing has an inalienable right to exist. Everything receives this privilege from the place it occupies in the order of nature. The day had come when this single fig tree must give final reckoning for its fulfilling the purpose for which God created it, fruitfulness. Consequently, Jesus did not violate the tree's nature by creating figs on it contrary to the will of the Father to whom He always gave Son-like obedience. Since the tree did not glorify God by properly fulfilling His purpose, its time of grace had elapsed.

MYTH OR MIRACLE?

It is highly ironic that theologians and Bible commentators who work at explaining this perplexing incident in Christ's life, should prove the very truth of the Lord's teaching given in it! In fact, a neat cleavage separates them into two groups: those who believe that Jesus really withered a fig tree and those who, after all attempts at explaining the story in naturalistic terms, just do not really think it could have taken place. Barclay (*Matthew*, II,278) simply states:

We may well believe that Jesus used the lesson of a diseased and degenerate fig tree to say to the Jews—and to us—that uselessness invites disaster, and profession without practice is doomed. That is surely what this story means, for we cannot think of Jesus as literally and physically blasting a fig tree for failing to bear fruit at a season when fruit was impossible.

Others tend to consider Luke 13:6ff., the parable of the unfruitful fig, as so parallel in thought to the withering of the fig tree, that the miracle must be considered to be an "enacted parable." Radaelli (*Lettura di un miracolo come introduzione all'intendimento del miracolo*, 47,52f.) pontificates:

The account of a "parable" does not alter the content of the kerygma, i.e. it does not hinder the communication of a precise message *even if it is presented as a historical "event" because of*

certain editorial concerns. It is especially this nucleus of editorial aims that must be preserved, it is this teaching of faith that must be considered as primary and essential, *not its channel by which it comes to us.* We must learn what the Evangelist means by the narration of the miracle of the fig. *It does not interest us for now whether this narration is history or not.* (Emphasis added.)

For Radaelli it did not bother the conscience of Matthew or Mark to transform into a miracle what must originally have been but a parable, as in Luke. It makes little difference whether Jesus ever concretely withered the fig tree or not. The important thing is to learn the "truth" He intended to teach. Rather than reject the Evangelists' account as unhistorical or as intentional fabrication of facts simply because of some problems involved in a literal interpretation of the text, would it not be far more reasonable to argue that these "scandalous" problems, rather than furnish reasons for its rejection, are proof of its historicity? Matthew and Mark could have foreseen the difficulties, yet they included them. In fact, these problems evidence the scandal of Christ who smashes many human notions of what the Messiah "must" be, not merely for ancient Israel but for modern scholars too.

IS THIS A MIRACLE OR A PARABLE?

Is there any basis in the text for thinking Jesus' cursing of the fig tree is an acted parable, intended by Jesus as an ominous warning to the fruitless Jewish nation soon to be destroyed for its barrenness? On whose authority may we confidently affirm that "the fig tree is a common metaphor for Israel"? None of the proof texts usually cited so affirm, since they often include other trees and vines as well. (Cf. Jer. 8:13; Ezek. 17:24; Mic. 7:1; Hos. 9:10, 16; 10:1, etc.) But granted that "fig tree" were a metaphor for "Israel" in every other context, what would make it so in THIS one? The following supposed parabolic parallels?

PARABOLIC PARALLELS

1. The fig tree event is the literary framework within which the temple cleansing occurs. Can there have been no deliberate intention of the Lord to follow precisely this sequence? However, the Lord did not state His reasons for choosing this particular sequence of events.

2. Both the fig tree and the temple of Israel appear lacking in some way: figs on the tree, dignity and righteousness in the temple.
3. Both provoke in Jesus an energetic reaction that borders on violence.
4. Both were physically stricken and, after some time had passed, destroyed.

However convincing these parallels seem, it must be stated that Jesus did not turn His miracle into a parable. In fact, He said nothing in our text about the Jewish nation, city or temple. It is highly significant that, when questioned about the fig tree's sudden demise, He turned directly to the instruction of the Twelve about their own faith, prayer and forgiveness. Not one word came from Jesus' lips concerning a presumed parabolic significance of His miracle. The REAL LESSON Jesus considered far more urgent than talk about fruitless Israel was the lesson of the FAITH and PRAYER of His own disciples. THIS lies at the heart of all fruitlessness.

A sensitive Jewish reader would perhaps have intuited the following lessons:

1. The danger of spiritual sterility
2. The authority and power of the Lord who can wither a sterile tree by merely a word.
3. The operational value of faith to accomplish the impossible.
4. Would he have also specifically grasped the sterility of Judaism from this event alone? Perhaps from the context of the temple cleansing and the following debates and Jesus' condemnation of the leaders of Israel. In fact, in Jesus' larger context (21:33f.), He did discuss a people that did not "produce the fruits" of the Kingdom.

Our ability to see a parable here arises, therefore, not from something in the text at hand, but from our intuitive appreciation of His many lessons on fruitfulness and barrenness already given. (Cf. Matt. 3:10; Luke 13:6-9; see notes on "The Importance of Fruit-bearing" at the end of this volume.)

So it is MEN who turn this miracle into a parable by reflecting on its meaning. Their psychological process proceeds somewhat as follows: if Jesus can so rigorously curse a fruitless fig tree, what must be the destiny of a fruitless people who do not produce what their Creator expects. To every believer this must be a warning that guarantees the damnation of uselessness and the punishment of proud promises without performance. If God eliminates useless, unfruitful

creatures with a suddenness and severity that surprises the observer, and if He does it with indisputable justice because of the rich opportunities to produce what, by their nature, they could be expected to produce, WHAT WILL HE DO WITH ME, if I too do not produce what, according to MY nature, I am rightly expected to produce to His satisfaction?! (Cf. John 15:1-11.) But this conclusion is not really based on the parallel, but upon other revelations of Jesus given elsewhere. (Cf. Matt. 25:14-46, etc.) He said nothing directly about OUR fruitlessness in our text.

It is only on this basis that the incident's lessons find application in the life of Israel. Whereinsofar the Jewish nation of Jesus' day showed a rich profession of zeal toward God, even to the point of enthusiastically welcoming His Messiah, but did not produce the fruit God desired, just so far it would be condemned as worthless. While the cursing of the fig tree anticipates the clear teaching of three parables that describe the destiny of those among God's people who will not have done His will (21:38—22:14), and while this episode serves also to introduce Jesus' severe denunciation of the Pharisees (chap. 23), it is really out of men's analysis of Jesus' judgment and His rationale for it, that they derive this parabolic sense, not from something stated in the text.

B. The Polluted Temple (21:12-17)

It is to be remembered that, at precisely this point (according to Mark's chronology), the Lord entered into His temple and cleaned out its ungodly traffic. In the estimation of many, this fact bears on the interpretation of the withering of the fig tree, as its perfect, necessary corollary, being also a scathing judgment upon a pretentious, but barren, religion. However, it is better to consider the cleansing of the temple as simply one more illustration of the principle implicit in the withering of the fig tree, rather than "a parabolic prophecy" of it.

II. POWER FROM GOD THROUGH FAITH, PRAYER AND MERCY (21:20-22)

A. The Disciples' Surprise (21:20; Mark 11:20f.)

21:20 **And when the disciples saw it**, a fully day had passed (Mark 11:19f.). Once again they are returning to Jerusalem from Bethany

where they had lodged the previous night (Matt. 21:17). Why did they not immediately notice the tree's withering?

1. If on the evening of the day the tree was cursed, they returned to Bethany by the same route as that taken in the morning, they may have passed the tree in the dark without noticing the change that had taken place in the tree either then withered or in its final stages of withering. Next day, they took the same trail and saw it by daylight.

2. McGarvey (*Evidences of Christianity*, 90) taught that

In Mark's account . . . the disciples are represented as not seeing the tree until the next morning after the curse was pronounced on it, although they went out to Bethany the next afternoon, and we should suppose that they passed by it (11:14, 19f.). This appears quite strange, if not unaccountable, until we inspect the route of travel between Jerusalem and Bethany, and find that there are two different paths, by either of which a person may pass up the western side of the Mount of Olives from one place to the other. One of the paths is very steep, while the other has a gradual slope. The steep path is the shorter of the two, and the one which a person would take naturally when coming down the mountainside toward the city, while the other would be naturally preferred by one going the other way. Now Jesus was coming into the city when He cursed the tree, and this accounts for the failure of the disciples to see it as they went out, and also for their seeing it when they came in the next morning. A coincidence so minute as this, and so artless, can be the work of none but an accurate writer.

But the disciples saw it! Brown, dry leaves stirring in the springtime breeze around the base of the now-bare, fruitless fig tree would catch their attention as it stood out in marked contrast to all that was green around it, as well as in contrast to its previously luxuriant foliage the previous day. They *saw it* and so become proof against modern skeptics who deny what they themselves did not see!

They marvelled, saying, How did the fig tree immediately wither away? A most remarkable reaction for Twelve men gifted with so many experiences of Jesus' divine power! How is such a response possible?

1. They marvelled, not because they had seen no miracles before, but because this was an unexpected evidence of His supernatural

power in a different sector of nature. Although they had witnessed countless wonders performed in the area of human sickness and death, demon-possession, in the forces of nature and some of its animal life, this was their first experiences with a miracle involving a tree.

2. Until now, Jesus' mighty works had been characterized by mercy and kindness. This one surprises the Twelve by the immediateness and completeness of the Lord's punitive judgment. Their reaction is entirely free from any criticism of His right to destroy the tree. Rather, they are astonished by the marvelous rapidity with which His curse is carried out.

How did the fig tree immediately wither away? (*pôs parachrêma exerânthe he sukê*) Most translators agree in rendering this Greek phrase as a question, implying the Twelve's desire to know the process. But did not they, of all people, already know that God could destroy the tree at the word of Jesus? Again, we must discern in what sense Jesus' response (21:21) really deals with their reaction. These can be understood in two ways:

1. AS A QUESTION: Disciples: "How did the tree wither?" Jesus: "By faith in God!" But must we suppose that the Twelve, who had apparently never before expressed any desire to know the inner workings of their Master's divine power, only now blurt out this impulsive question that delves into the mechanics of supernatural intervention? This is possible, even though His answer would be more indirect. "Have faith and doubt not" transfers their attention from idle curiosity about the physical mechanics of the supernatural to a proper emphasis on the spiritual connection with the power of GOD who makes such wonderful deeds possible. This shift of emphasis is evident when it is remembered that faith in itself does not directly produce a miracle. It is God Himself who does it. Faith is only the moral condition of His human agent or of the miracle's recipient. It may well be that Jesus intended NOT to answer the disciples question as they intended it, in order to remind them of their position as disciples and servants of God. Thus they had to leave the physical mechanics of supernatural intervention in His hands, while depending on His power to perform such wonders.
2. AS AN EXCLAMATION: Disciples: "How rapidly the tree withered!" Jesus: "By faith in God you too can do even more

marvelous things than this! Anyone who has faith can do that and more!"

a. An exclamation is grammatically possible:

(1) The question mark is not inspired, but a translator's choice interpretation.

(2) The Greek word order permits the phrase to be rendered as an exclamation.

(a) Compare the use of the interrogative adverb *pôs* rendered as a correlative adverb, making exclamations in passages like Mark 10:23f. = Luke 18:24; Luke 12:50; John 11:36. (Cf. Blass-Debrunner, §436, however, cf. §396 mentioned below; Arndt-Gingrich, 740, §3 article *pôs*; Rocci, 1634)

(b) Because *pôs* had begun to assume the function of *hoti* to introduce indirect discourse (Blass-Debrunner, §396, and Matt. 19:23 in contrast with Mark 10:23f.), our sentence could also be translated, "And seeing (it), the disciples marveled, saying, 'The fig tree withered suddenly!'" *Pôs* (= *hòti*) functions practically as quotation marks. But even so, the disciples' comments prove to be a series of exclamations, so the practical result is the same. (Cf. also Mark 11:21.)

b. An exclamation is at least as much in harmony with the disciples' astonishment as a question, if not more so.

c. Mark's parallel citation of Peter's words (Mark 11:21) contains exclamations: "Master, look! The fig-tree you cursed has withered!"

d. Several translators recognize the disciples' reaction as an exclamation, among whom the Berkeley Version by G. Verkuyl, the Twentieth Century New Testament and J. B. Phillips in English, and the Bibbia Concordia in Italian.

So rendered, the exclamation, which by its character still demands an explanation from Jesus, leads quite naturally into Jesus' explanation (21:21f.), since the disciples are no longer thought to be seeking that information which could have been drawn from their own rich experiences with the Lord. Rather, their astonishment (*ethaùmasan*) is based, not on inexplicable ignorance of Jesus' supernatural power, but on the mind-boggling rapidity (*pôs parachrema!* = "How swiftly!") with which His curse was carried out.

B. The Lord's Lesson (21:21f.; Mark 11:22-25)

1. "Unwavering confidence in God does achieve truly amazing results."

21:21 If you have faith and doubt not. The Lord now brings His men into fellowship with Him in His power by sharing with them the secret behind such marvelously instantaneous results. Rather than explain how He worked the miracle, drawing attention to the mechanics, rather than justify His severe judgment on the tree, drawing attention to Himself, Jesus turned the spotlight on the fundamental principle of confidence in God and dependence on Him as the source of all true power. "Have faith in God" (Mark 11:22) beautifully summarizes Jesus' message and the basic goal of His ministry. He aimed to build faith in God among all who follow Him. He is not so much interested that we believe in the power of prayer as He is that we have faith in God who answers them, a confidence that trusts the power, wisdom and goodness of Him who can enable us to do the impossible instantly. He is so dedicated to producing real faith, that He expresses Himself here in the most vivid and encouraging language possible.

Further, because it was contextually JESUS' miracle that is the basis of His encouragement to believe God unwaveringly, may we not also infer that it was His own confident trust in the Father that stands at the base of His power? And did not the Father hear Him on many occasions precisely because of His reverent submission and His learned obedience? (Cf. Heb. 5:7ff.; John 4:34; 11:38ff.)

You will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will be done. Jesus argues from the lesser to the greater, inasmuch as cursing fig trees could be considered less impressive than ordering huge mountains around. In fact, physical removal of mountains is literally possible for a God who can do anything at the request of His believing children. And yet, how much actual rearranging of earth's geography is really intended by the Lord or understood by the Twelve? To understand Jesus' language as figurative is not to discount His words as unimportant. Even if He did not intend His men to understand Him literally, He did intend to be taken seriously! Rather, His words are proverbial for achieving what is humanly impossible. By saying *this mountain*, referring to the Mount of Olives on which they were then standing, He rendered this common proverb even more vivid.

If it be asked how the removal of figurative mountains could be psychologically superior to the stupendous miracle Jesus had just performed by blasting the fig tree, the answer is to be found in a later promise somewhat parallel in thought (John 14:12). His miracles were merely the scaffolding which supported His claims. But what is all-important for Jesus is the proclamation of His message throughout the world, because what actually saves men is this message, not His miracles. So, when His people would in faith move mountains of unbelief and hindrances by gospel proclamation all over the earth, thus making other believers in Him and saving them for eternity, this is far greater in His eyes.

Study Jesus' syntax: **You will not only do . . . to the fig tree, but even . . . to this mountain.** Both a cursing and a removing of impossible barriers would be within the province of believing disciples, a fact that has several ramifications:

1. There would be some negative, difficult work ahead for them. They would not find their discipleship unencumbered, but plagued by what cried out for cursing, and their progress hampered by difficulties to be removed.
2. Such a difficulty ministry could not be marked by presumptuous self-confidence nor by self-doubt and fear. Rather, all decisions they must make must occur within the larger context of faithful dependence upon God.

If you have faith and doubt not: how badly these men needed this admonition is illustrated by the failure of some of them to cast out a demon precisely because of their lack of faith and prayer. (See notes on Matt. 17:19f.; Mark 9:28f.) This unwavering faith in God was the absolutely essential condition which would connect them with the power of the living God.

Even if "moving mountains" is figurative rather than literal, this does not detract from the fact that these very disciples had already done tasks in harmony with God's will that would have proven impossible for doubters to perform, tasks just as impossible as causing a mountain to plunge suddenly into the sea. Peter had walked on the water by faith (Matt. 14:29). In Jesus' name the Twelve had conquered demons (Luke 10:17). Later these same men would plunge into a busy, miracle-filled ministry. (Acts 2:1-12, 43; 3:6-9; 5:12-16; 9:32-43; 19:11, 12, etc.) In fact, to believe that a handful of believers

belonging to an obscure people dominated by the super-power of Rome, yet without substantial economic resources, the assistance of diplomatic influence or military forces, could somehow change the direction of world history by the unique might of a preached message, is tantamount to believing that, with a single, simple gesture, a man could order a mountain to throw itself into the ocean!

2. "Trusting Prayer, Confident of God's Concern and Power, Is Sure To Be Answered" (21:22)

21:22 And all things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive. Three major questions are involved in the correct understanding of this text:

1. To what extent should *all things whatever ye shall ask* be considered universal and to what extent limited?
2. If *believing*, and its parallel, "doubt not" (21:21), are the absolute minimum requirements limiting the apparently universal promise of Jesus, what, specifically, must be believed and not doubted?
3. When is it that *ye shall receive*? Must every believing prayer have an instantaneous, positive response from God?

Failure correctly to understand Jesus will lead to false expectations and consequent disappointments. Lest the unprepared disciple should be misled to think that "you can get anything—*anything* you ask for in prayer—if you believe," it is appropriate to study everything Jesus affirmed about proper praying, since His various statements furnish a context within which to comprehend these astonishingly unqualified promises in our text. (Cf. Matt. 6:5-15; 7:7-11; 6:19-34; 9:38; 17:20; 18:19f.)

1. Jesus will personally answer prayers addressed in His name (John 14:13f.). Since His name is the symbol for all that this name stands for, all that He had revealed about Himself, then only those prayers formulated in harmony with His self-revelation have any hope of an answer. His name is no magic formula tacked onto prayer to guarantee its being heard. "In His name" means "on the basis of HIS worthiness" and in harmony with His willingness to loan us the use of His good name.
2. Jesus will answer prayers "that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:13). No prayer can be considered that does not seek

God's glory. This desire to glorify the Father automatically screens out our unworthy, selfish requests. Since God decides by what standard His glory is truly enhanced, this implies that our praying must be in harmony with His will.

3. God will answer those who prove themselves to be friends of Jesus, a fact demonstrated by their obvious obedience to Him in their love for one another, their willingness to work together and in the abiding results of their lives (Matt. 18:19; John 15:12-17; I John 3:21f.).
4. God will answer the prayers that meet the scrutiny of Him whose personal intercession is absolutely essential to their being granted a hearing with God (John 16:23, "in my name"; I John 2:1; I Tim. 2:5). Obviously, such prayers must accord with the nature and will of Christ. Nevertheless, the believer is sure to be heard, if he prays for what Christ wants! To pray well, we must study HIM HIS goals, HIS desires, HIS methods, HIS intentions.
5. Jesus promises answer for those who are deeply and humbly conscious of their own limitations, their lack of wisdom, their sinfulness, their inability to foresee solutions, their need for knowledge and their need for an intercessor (Matt. 18:3f., 11; Rom. 8:26f.).
6. God will answer prayer according to His will (I John 5:14f.). When we learn to desire what He desires, nothing good will be withheld from us (Ps. 37:4). However God has limited His own freedom to grant just any and every prayer we pray. These limitations express His own character and program for world redemption. They also automatically restrict what we may reasonably expect from Him, no matter how trusting and free from doubt we think we are. God has deliberately stated His will in Scripture, so that we can learn both to pray and act aright. He will answer in harmony with all of these facets of His will that bear on the many, complex questions involved in any request we make:
 - a. God's will is knowable (Eph. 1:9; 3:2-6; 5:10, 17; 6:6; Col. 1:9; 4:12).
 - b. God's will is revealed only to humble disciples (Matt. 11:25f.).
 - c. God's will is grasped by mind-transforming self-sacrifice (Rom. 12:1, 2).
 - d. Scripture came by God's will (II Peter 1:21). Paul, for example, was an Apostle by God's will (Col. 1:1, 25-29) and what he writes is the Lord's will (I Cor. 14:37; I Thess. 2:13; Acts 20:27).
 - e. God's will is possible for man to do it (Acts 13:22, 36), although

difficult (Heb. 10:36). He even furnishes the gracious power to help us do it (Phil. 2:13; Heb. 13:20f.)! Even after Satan's victories (II Tim. 2:26)!

- f. God wants everyone to be saved (II Peter 3:9; I Tim. 2:4; Luke 12:32; Eph. 1:5). God wills that only Jesus deliver men (Gal. 1:3, 4; Acts 2:23; John 6:39f.) and He chose to save by means of the Gospel (I Cor. 1:21). He finds no pleasure in cowardly backsliders (Heb. 10:38). Spiritual kinship to Jesus is judged by obedience to God's will (Mark 3:35).
- g. God wills that we be thoroughly pure (I Thess. 4:3-8; Heb. 10:10; 12:14; John 17:15-19), sanctified by obedient faith (James 1:21f.; Heb. 11:6; 10:7, 10; I Peter 1:22-25). God hates sin (I Cor. 10:5).
- h. God wills that we live a full Christian life (Rom. 14:17f.), useful to others (Heb. 13:15f.).
- i. God wills that we show His same deep concern for the weakest (Matt. 18:14 in context). The body of Christ is also set up like He wants it, even with its weakest members to care for (I Cor. 12:18, 24-28).
- j. God's judgment is on the side of mercy for those who show mercy to others (Matt. 9:13; 5:7; 6:12, 14f.; 18:33, 35).
- k. God's will is the final arbiter for distributing His gifts (Heb. 2:4; Rom. 12:3-8; I Cor. 12:11).
- l. God may will that we suffer for Christ's sake (Phil. 1:29; I Peter 2:20; 3:17; 4:19). This may involve not giving us what would eliminate the suffering.
- m. God wills that we be thankful in all circumstances (I Thess. 5:18).
- n. God wills that we silence His opponents by our good life (I Peter 2:15; John 8:46).
- o. God wills that we love Him above all, and our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:28-33).
- p. God is pleased by Jesus and He becomes our example (Matt. 3:17; 17:5; I Peter 2:21-25). But He prayed, "Not my will but yours be done" (Matt. 26:39, 42). His goal must be ours (Heb. 10:7, 9; I Peter 4:1, 2).
- q. God wills to provide our every necessity, our daily bread (Matt. 6:11, 19-34; 10:29-31; Phil. 4:19; I Peter 5:7).
- r. God's will includes all creation (Rev. 4:11). In order to run an orderly universe, He may not choose to answer some of our prayers that require His creating disorder to do it.

- s. God detests this godless world and all it offers, all that is based on the appetites, greedy ambitions and all that men think glamorous (I John 2:15ff.).
- t. God's many-sided will may involve other principles as well. Consider these Old Testament expressions: Deut. 10:12ff.; I Sam. 15:22; Ps. 40:6-8; 50:7-23; 51:16ff.; 66:18; 69:30f.; Prov. 15:29; Isa. 1:15ff.; Jer. 7:21ff.; Hos. 4:1; 6:4-6; Amos 5:21ff.; Mic. 6:8.

The above texts lead inescapably to the conclusion that God will not give absolutely EVERYTHING that is asked for in prayer by the sincere believer.

Jesus does not mean that anyone may, without any basis in God's word, fancifully hope that God unquestioningly hand over anything His misguided disciple requests, merely on the basis of that disciple's ability to develop a psychological confidence that God will so act. This would reduce God to be the justifier of the unjustifiable gift, the automatic contributor to man's delinquency by mechanically conceding him everything he could develop enough psychological "faith" to convince himself God would give (cf. James 4:3). Our Lord offers no magical mechanism that justifies our expecting automatic blessing to be had just by praying.

Rather, Jesus refers to that faith that comes by hearing the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). We must believe the rich promises God has already given and frame our praying accordingly (II Peter 1:3f.). This faith must have an objective basis, not only in the truthfulness of God, but also in what He has actually said. We must also be prepared for God's negative responses. His refusal to take some of our prayers literally is far better than all we could have asked or imagined (Eph. 3:20; II Cor. 12:7-10). What if we mistakenly ask for a serpent instead of a fish, a stone instead of bread or a scorpion in place of an egg (cf. Luke 11:9-13; Matt. 7:7-11)? When we do not know how we ought to pray, we need the help of God's Spirit (Rom. 8:26). SHOULD we really receive what we pray for, in our ignorance *believing* it for our good, when to receive it would really harm us? It is a good thing that God does not answer some of our prayers! We must keep open alternatives to let God answer as HIS wisdom leads. This kind of believing trusts that what God has said, He really will bring to pass (Rom. 4:21). Consequently, we are not at liberty to expect or require of Him anything that He has not already indicated in His Word. In fact, it would be highly instructive to compare the few things

He has NOT promised with the foregoing list of things He HAS. But for anything He has committed Himself to, we may and must ask in full certainty (James 1:5-8).

Because of His faithfulness revealed in His Word, our confidence in Him leads us to depend upon His will. This persuasion is not that if we desire a thing ardently enough to pray about it, we shall surely have it. Rather, we believe that God's unlimited power guarantees His ability to answer our prayer, if our requests coincide with what He wills (I John 5:14f.). The faith required is our unshakable certainty of His perfect dominion over every element involved in the total answer to our prayer. But, if to us He is truly LORD, then HE decides, not we ourselves (Luke 17:5-10).

Doubt not (21:21) "in heart" (Mark 11:23), the reverse side of unconditional faith in God's promises, is the inability to move with certainty and decision by praying for and expecting what God committed Himself to deliver. *Doubt* considers as impossible, or at least uncertain, that what we pray for will actually occur (cf. Mark 9:22ff.). Despite God's promise to provide a certain thing to every Christian, the doubter is inwardly divided in that he both trusts and does not trust God to give it (cf. James 1:6-8). *Doubt* makes the distrustful person his own worst enemy in that it divides his basis of certainty at the very moment he must approach God with his whole heart. Because faith is the basis of man's communion with God, and because doubt divides man and weakens his confidence, doubt is naturally the sin that breaks communion with God. *Doubt* is hesitating when we ought to be acting confidently on questions God has already decided and announced in His Word.

Doubts are mental reservations. While we must have no mental reservations about anything God has said, they can certainly hinder our "believing that what you say will occur." We may be troubled by mental reservations about whether we should even ask Him to provide certain things:

1. How should we approach prayer for certain things about which we may have some doubts as to the true usefulness or value to us in our ministry to Him? Pray for wisdom, not easy answers (James 1:5ff.).
2. How should we ask concerning a choice we suspect to be forbidden in Scripture, but at the moment, remain uncertain whether we read it in the Bible or merely imagined it or were taught it by men? We must refuse to participate in it until our conscience is at rest,

assured by God's truth. (Cf. Rom. 14:23; I Cor. 8:1-7; John 7:16f.; 8:31f.)

3. Even if certain things have not been forbidden in Scripture, they may not have been specifically promised to all Christians. This may undermine our confidence and create mental reservations about asking for them.

If Jesus did not promise miraculous gifts to every Christian as an expression of the Holy Spirit's work in each one, can the modern Christian truly pray, without some mental reservation, for such gifts as supernatural inspiration to prophesy, power to heal others instantly or any other special gift? (Cf. Acts 9:40!)

4. We certainly should have mental reservations about putting God to unnecessary tests by our pleading that certain events under His undisputed control should occur, events which He has not promised to bring about. (Remember how Jesus handled Satan's quotation of Scripture promises of help for the godly! Matt. 4:6f.)

Jesus' presuppositions behind His dictum, then, are: after you have examined God's will to discern what He has actually promised to give you His child, after you have learned in what sense He intended His promises (good hermeneutics), after you are certain you have understood whether the specific promise in question applies to you personally and not to the whole Church in general or to special functionaries therein, THEN you can pray in full confidence that what you ask for is already yours, guaranteed by the faithfulness of a God who cannot lie to you.

1. This way the mental reservations based on ignorance of God's will are eliminated by knowledge. (Study Col. 1:9-12; Eph. 1:15-19; Phil. 1:9-11; 3:12-16, esp. 15.)
2. This way the mental reservations based on distrust of God are exposed for the unbelief they really are (Heb. 11:6).
3. This way no prayer will be prayed for things God has not promised in His Word.
4. But even before this, during it and thereafter, we have the Spirit's help with our ignorance and weakness (Rom. 8:26f.) as well as that of our High Priest, Jesus Christ (Heb. 7:25; 4:14ff.).

In short, Jesus is saying, "Believe what you pray! Do not ask God for what you do not yourself believe possible! Let your prayers reflect your true view of God!"

How peculiarly appropriate was this teaching of Jesus:

1. With regard to the disciples' immediate perplexities! Why Jesus should have claimed Messianic dignity so publicly and yet just as publicly refused to do what they expected an earthly Christ to do, must have seemed highly contradictory to them.
2. Contemporaneously, the fact that He did not precipitously turn such terrible power against the evil men of that day pointed to His deep mercy that furnished them opportunity to repent. As the disciples reflected later on Jesus' self-surrender to His enemies, they could have thought: "Why, He could have withered them as easily as He blasted that fig tree—with just a word!" This has a dual benefit:
 - a. It would tend to strengthen their faith in the face of the apparent triumph of evil. Jesus dramatically assured them of the infinite power which God could mobilize on behalf of His people any-time they asked for it believing.
 - b. To the extent they could appreciate the horrible firepower at His disposal but never used in His own self-defense, it would exalt His marvelous meekness and patience and the greatness of His grace. His meekness became their standard of behavior under fire. (Contrast Luke 9:54f.)
3. With regard to the great obstacles yet future! The blasted fig tree stood as a concrete symbol of God's power to remove the most formidable barriers ever to stand in their way. How exceedingly helpful must have been Jesus' promise to them as they remembered His words and lived in the confidence that everything needful to establish God's Kingdom was theirs by faith in a God who moves mountains that stand in the way! (Cf. Zech. 4:7.)

Had they had but eyes to see it, real faith in God had already marvelously moved mountains of doubt and fear from the disciples' minds, letting them see Jesus for what He really is.

FACT QUESTIONS

1. In what order does Matthew present his account of the cursing of the fig tree and of the cleansing of the temple?
2. In what sense does it seem that Matthew contradicts the testimony of Mark in regard to the order of events?
3. Furnish a plausible explanation that resolves the apparent contradiction between the two accounts.

4. What indications does Matthew furnish in his text that show that he knew he was reorganizing the order of the two events?
5. Where had Jesus been when He saw the fig tree?
6. Where was He going?
7. At what time of day did He see the fig tree?
8. According to Matthew, where precisely was the fig located?
9. What characteristics of the tree induced Jesus to approach it?
10. In what period of the year did this event occur?
11. Tell what you know about fig trees that assists in understanding this story.
12. With what words did Jesus curse the fig tree?
13. According to Matthew, what happened when Jesus pronounced the curse upon the tree?
14. According to Mark, when did they discover the effect produced in the fig tree by Jesus' words?
15. Explain why the disciples saw the effect of the cursing only at a later time, as Mark describes it. What elements in Mark's account suggest a rapid, but gradual, process involved in the withering?
16. What was the reaction of the disciples when they saw the effect of the cursing of the fig tree? Who voiced their reaction?
17. According to Jesus, what is the lesson to be learned from this event?
18. On what mountain were Jesus and His disciples standing when He spoke of moving "this mountain"?
19. Is there any basis for the assumption of many that Jesus' cursing of the fig tree is an acted parable intended by Jesus to refer to the fruitless Jewish nation soon to be destroyed for its barrenness? If so, what is that basis? If not, why not?

SECTION 57:

JESUS MEETS CHALLENGES TO HIS AUTHORITY: THREE PARABLES OF WARNING

(Parallels: Mark 11:27—12:1; Luke 20:1-8)

TEXT: 21:23-32

A. Jesus' Authority Challenged

23 And when he was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching, and said,

By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?

24 And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one question, which if ye tell me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven or from men?

And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven, he will say unto us, Why then did ye not believe him? 26 But if we shall say, From men; we fear the multitude; for all hold John as a prophet. 27 And they answered Jesus, and said, We know not.

He also said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things.

B. The Parable of the Two Sons

28 But what think ye? A man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work today in the vineyard. 29 And he answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented himself and went. 30 And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: but went not. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?

They say, The first.

Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, that the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. 32 For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not; but the publicans and harlots believed him: and ye, when ye saw it, did not even repent yourselves afterward, that ye might believe him.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. On what quite reasonable basis could the religious authorities in Israel argue their right to challenge Jesus' authority to teach and act as He did?
- b. What is the fundamental assumption behind the religious authorities' challenge, the belief that motivates them personally to fling their challenge before Jesus?
- c. Since Jesus is challenged by the supreme religious authority in Israel, should He not respond respectfully by furnishing what they request, rather than by countering their question with another question? Is this not dodging the issue? If not, what is the real issue?

- d. How does Jesus' question about the baptism of John really deal with the main issue at stake in this situation?
- e. Do you think Jesus was concerned primarily, or, only, with the act of baptism as practiced by John, or do you think He included more of John's ministry as well? If you believe He intended more than the act of baptism, what else do you think He included? On what basis do you think this?
- f. What is the special moral rightness about Jesus' refusal to furnish credentials to these religious authorities?
- g. What is so specially sinful about the authorities' confessed indecision about John the Baptist?
- h. If men are to enter the kingdom of God on the same basis, how is it possible for some (like tax collectors and harlots) to be granted precedence over others (like chief priests and other authorities like them)?
- i. If faith must precede repentance, since one cannot change his mind about what he does not believe, how can Jesus expect the religious authorities, even after witnessing the conversion of publicans and harlots to "repent and believe (John)"? Why was this order necessary for them?
- j. What do you think would have been the reaction of common people who witnessed Jesus' treatment of the authorities? What would the people be able to see in the answer the authorities gave Jesus concerning His question about John the Baptist?
- k. What is the special value of a well-formed question in dealing with people in an antagonistic situation such as that faced by Jesus here? What may we learn from His use of questions as a method of teaching?
- l. What is the special value of a well-turned story with a decision-demanding question at the end, as illustrated in the parable of the two sons? Where else in the Scriptures do we find other highly effective stories constructed on this same pattern?
- m. How does this episode help us to understand God's basic plan of salvation?
- n. What does this text teach us about the redemption of the Jewish people: i.e. are they to be saved on a personal or on a national basis? Why do you answer as you do? Then, how does the text influence our understanding of the present place of Israel in the plan of God regarding the future.

- o. What does this section reveal about the nature of proof whereby a true prophet is to be tested and distinguished from a false one?
- p. How would you explain the religious leaders' rejection of John's ministry and message?
- q. How do you account for the religious leaders' inability to appreciate the conversion of the "sinners" in Jewish society? Should not the former have rejoiced and glorified God for this remarkable result obtained by John?
- s. In what ways is Jesus' story of the two sons here similar to His parable of the Prodigal Son and the Self-righteous Elder Brother (Luke 15:11-32)? Note that that story begins exactly as does this one: "There was a man who had TWO sons." What similarities and differences are discernible between them?

PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

On one of those days they arrived again in Jerusalem and He entered the temple courts. While He was walking around there, teaching the people and proclaiming God's word, the chief priests, the theologians and the councilors of the Jewish nation stepped up to Him as He was busy teaching, and demanded, "What right do you have to do what you do? Who authorized you to act this way?"

"And I too have a question for you, just one," replied Jesus. "If you tell me the answer, then I will also inform you as to what sort of authority I have for what I do. Tell me about John the Baptist: who sent him to immerse people—God or men? Answer me that!"

They began discussing it among themselves, arguing, "If we answer, 'God sent him,' He can retort, 'Then why did you reject his message?' On the other hand, if we say, 'He was acting on human motives,' we have the people to fear. Everyone will stone us to death, since they are convinced that John was really a prophet of God." So their answer to Jesus was: "We do not know who sent him."

"In that case," replied Jesus, "neither am I going to tell you by what sort of authority I do what I have done." He then began to tell them a series of illustrative stories: "What is your opinion about the following story? There was a certain man who had two sons. He approached the first and said, 'My boy, go work in the vineyard today.' But the boy answered, 'I don't want to!' Afterward, however, he regretted what he had said, and went. The father also went to the second and repeated the same thing to him. This son answered, 'Yes,

sir!’ but did not go. Now, which of the two actually did what their father wanted?”

The authorities answered, “The first one.”

“Right,” continued Jesus, “and I can tell you this: crooks and prostitutes will get into God’s kingdom ahead of you! You see, John came to YOU on a mission of righteousness, but you refused to believe him. However, the crooks and harlots did. And although you saw that, you did not even afterwards feel remorse enough to believe him.”

SUMMARY

While Jesus was teaching in the temple, the religious and political authorities challenged His right to act as He was. He silenced them by asking them a question He knew they could not answer without both incriminating themselves for their unbelief in the eyes of the people, and disqualifying themselves to ask for such credentials from Him. If they could not decide about John the Baptist whom all acknowledged to be a genuine prophet of God, on what ground could they be trusted to judge Jesus’ credentials supporting His claim to come from God? Jesus then told the story of the two sons, one finally obedient although at first rebellious, and the other, apparently obedient, but really disobedient. These represent the Jewish hierarchy as only apparently obedient to God, while the more flagrant sinners who do what God wants are really so. Worse still, the hierarchy remained obstinately unmoved by this display of true piety. The Kingdom of God would be open to the flagrant sinners who repented, but closed to the respectable sinners whose moral condition blocked all repentance.

NOTES

I. THE AUTHORITIES ATTACK

21:23 And when he entered the temple, He had just come from Bethany (21:17, see notes). **Into the temple** means into the courts surrounding the sanctuary proper, not unlikely on the southeast side near Solomon’s porch. (Cf. John 10:23ff.; Acts 3:11; 5:12.) Mark and Luke capture the setting of the hierarchy’s attack which follows: He was surrounded by eager listeners to His doctrine.

The chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him. Both Mark and Luke note that “scribes” swelled the delegation. Since these three special groups may be distinguished from the whole council (Mark 15:1; Luke 22:66 as opposed to Mark 14:43, 53), it

would seem that this is a delegation and not the whole Council. However, that each major group is represented here gives added importance to the whole procedure. Even if a formal public resolution in the Sanhedrin to send an investigative committee were "entirely outside their recognized mode of procedure" (Edersheim, *Life*, 1,309), the fact that this was a privately organized, informal mission does not weaken its psychological effect. **The chief priests** were either members of the families of the high priest (cf. Acts 4:6), or priests responsible for special tasks involved in the temple worship. **The elders of the people** were laymen, representatives of the nation of Israel. The "scribes" (Luke 20:1) were influential rabbis or theologians. (Cf. Gamaliel, Acts 5:34ff.) As is clear from 21:45, this delegation is loaded with representatives from both major religious schools of thought, the Sadducees, in the person of the chief priests, and the Pharisees.

The attack came **as He was teaching**. The leaders were struggling separately to retain the prestige of their position and influence over the nation, but Jesus kept revealing and denouncing their wickedness. To break His hold on the popular mind (cf. Mark 11:18; Luke 19:47f.), they unleashed this subtle but dangerous attack while He was surrounded by adoring followers. The approach of these stately dignitaries may have been intended to communicate an impressive display of authority as they suddenly materialize (*epèstesan*, Luke 20:1) in order to achieve the maximum psychological effect of exposing this unblest provincial before the crowd as an illegitimate, self-proclaimed intruder. Since they themselves were afraid of the people (21:45f.), they probably hoped to stigmatize Him publically so as to deprive Him of His popularity and consequent protection. By this approach did they hope to stampede Him into some off-the-cuff rash admission?

By what authority are you doing these things? and who gave you this authority? This question implies three things:

1. That Jesus had in fact been doing something significant which they must formally investigate in this manner;
2. that these inquisitors themselves enjoyed the unquestionable right to demand to examine His credentials;
3. that nothing He had ever said or done indicated to them that God authenticated His mission, message or manners.

These things, although a vague charge, must include not only what they would have termed "pseudo-Messianic rabble-rousing," such as the Messianic entry into Jerusalem and His unceremonious temple-cleansing, but also the miracles He had performed in the temple.

The clear sight of the recently blind and the normal movement of those who had until but recently been crippled (Matt. 21:14f.) should answer their question for them, unless they dig up the discredited accusation of collusion with Beelzebul! (Cf. Matt. 12:22-45.) Their most recent objection to Him lay in His defending children who unquestionably attributed to Him titles of Messiahship. (See on 21:15.) Because the responsibility to judge false prophets and religious frauds was clearly theirs (*Sanhedrin* 1:5), their major complaint was His assuming the position of Teacher of the crowds without prior authorization by any of the recognized authorities in Israel. Certainly no priest, whose was the exclusive monopoly over temple affairs, had authorized the temple's cleansing. No recognized theologian had ordained Him to teach there or anywhere. Had some Roman allowed Him a puppet-governor's right to play the part of "Messianic King"? So, because Jesus was but a common Jew and no priest, they suspected He could claim neither the authority of Church or State for His presuming to assume the management of the temple and exercise royal authority.

But we must not suppose that jealousy for their position was the only motive driving these leaders to demand who He thought He was and who had authorized Him to behave so "imperiously." Most certainly involved is their concept of authority. In fact, authority to teach in Judaism was conveyed by the imposition of hands in a formal ceremony of ordination after the accurate communication of traditions. Edersheim (*Life*, II,381f.) taught that "there was no principle more firmly established by universal consent than that *authoritative* teaching required previous authorization." This lack of accreditation by the proper rabbis was precisely the point at which Jesus seemed to be most vulnerable (cf. John 7:15). Ironically, the principle of authority to which they must appeal for their own right to lead Israel eventually originated in Scripture. But the same Bible taught that a prophet must receive his authorization directly from God (Deut. 18:15-22) even without any other human recognition! (Cf. Amos 3:3-8; 7:12-15; Gal. 1:1, 12, 16f.; 2:6.)

By what authority? means "by what kind of (*pois*) authority?" The fundamental assumption behind this challenge is their absolute certainty that He did not enjoy God's authority, hence His activity must be accounted for on some other basis. (Contrast John 3:21) These learned rulers might have conceded liberty of opinion to any itinerate rabbi who wanted to express his views publicly, but not to

Jesus who subverted their system. His personal holiness and compassion (cf. Matt. 7:15-20), His incisive but notably untraditional teaching of the meaning of God's Word (cf. Matt. 7:29) and His unquestionably true miracles (cf. Deut. 18:21f.; II Cor. 12:12) and His harmony with other prophetic revelations (cf. Deut. 13:1ff.; Isa. 8:20; Jer. 26), meant completely nothing to them as credentials! (Study I Kings 22:24-28; Jer. 20:1-6; chap. 23.)

In the mind of His inquisitors, what alternatives lay open to Jesus? The audacity of His demeanor and that of His followers implied that He claimed royal Messianic authority. Now if He denied it, His followers would abandon Him for disappointing them. If He admitted it, the authorities could turn Him over to the Roman procurator for treason. Again, if He disclaimed all authority, His actions would then lack any rationale, and He would be exposed as a fool or, worse, as an imposter. If He remained mute, they could insinuate that His silence tacitly confessed the falsity of His pretenses. If He tried to claim that God had given Him this miraculous power and this authority to teach, they could twist His answer and charge Him with blasphemy (cf. John 5:17f.). Thus, their question was not primarily intended to protect the people of God against a potential imposter, but to lead Him into a fatal trap. Normally, their question would be quite understandable and entirely justifiable, because acceptance of what anyone teaches depends on the listener's evaluation of his authority to say what he does. Technically, their formal question is in order. So it is not with the formulation of their challenge that Jesus must quarrel, but with the insincerity He sees in their motivation.

II. JESUS COUNTERATTACKS

"John's authority is indicative of mine" (21:24-27).

21:24 And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one question which, if ye tell me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things. With what unruffled calm and unparalleled presence of mind He reacts! Is this evidence of only supernatural insight, and not also the reflection of careful personal preparation to meet just such a demand? This question had already arisen in Jesus' ministry (John 2:18; 6:30; Matt. 12:38; 16:1). He had already furnished answers that would have satisfied the honest mind. Now He must deal with the other kind.

Although Jesus' counter-challenge takes the form of a question, He may literally have said to them, "And I will ask you for a statement." (*erotèso humàs kagò lòngon hénà*; cf. Arndt-Gingrich, 285 §2, article: *eperotào* and 312 §2, article *erotào*: "to ask for, request" taken together with *lòngon*: "statement," *ibid.*, 478, article *lògos*, §1 *gamma*. However, Arndt-Gingrich render our text: "I will ask you a question." Lenski, *Matthew*, 828: "*Lògon hénà* = 'just one matter' and no more.")

Jesus' reaction is not artful evasion, since answering one question with another was not unknown among the rabbis. Observe the wisdom of Jesus' technique evident here:

1. He who asks a question asks the favor of an answer, and so cannot refuse to concede a favor asked of him without exposing his own unfairness. Thus, the rulers who asked Jesus the courtesy of an answer, could not easily refuse Him the courtesy of an answer to just one question, especially when He clearly declared His willingness to meet their demands immediately thereafter. If they refuse to answer His, when He had asked them one, they cannot then complain of any injustice in His refusal.
2. He knew that their question presumed their right to ask for His credentials. But their presumption must not go unquestioned, and that publicly. Normally, no one would dare ask publicly recognized officials for those documents that validate their right to question all others. But, precisely because He knew that THESE men perverted righteousness by rejecting God's true messengers, He must show for all to see that these officials were totally unqualified as holy inquisitors, hence had nothing more than a pretended right to grill Him as they were. Yet, by promising them a proper answer to their question, He tacitly admitted their responsibility and consequent authority to challenge all would-be prophets and teachers, and to decide without fear or favor. While it is unquestionably true that we are not automatically obligated to answer everyone's questions merely because he asks—either because the answer is not his to know or because the question itself is wrongly framed or otherwise impossible to answer—nevertheless, Jesus was obligated to furnish prophetic credentials sooner or later.
3. His was no crude trick or evasive counterquestion, because, were they correctly to answer His question, they would have a solid basis upon which to appreciate the correct answer to their own. (See

on 21:25.) His, then, is a highly effective way of answering, since He stimulates them to answer their own question for themselves. The key to the main question often lies in the correct answer to a question that must be taken first.

4. JESUS HAD ALREADY ANSWERED THIS QUESTION BEFORE. How many times must a faithful witness give his testimony before his word is to be accepted as true (cf. Rev. 1:5)? Doubtlessly numerous investigating committees had poured out their reports before the Sanhedrin, quoting verbatim His replies to this same query answered on other occasions. (Cf. Matt. 12, esp. vv. 9-14, 23, 38ff.; 16:1-4; John 2:18ff.; 5:15-47; the special case of the man born blind, John 9:24-34; 10:24-39.) Jesus cannot be unaware that they are not honestly seeking information, since the chief priests and Pharisees had united the council in the determination to put Jesus to death (John 11:47-53). So, their question is anything but a legitimate, innocent, routine request of credentials.
5. There is a special, moral rightness that Jesus should refuse to furnish His credential to THESE men. To continue providing evidence of His divine authority, when adequate proof had already been given, is to place in doubt the adequacy of the foregoing proof as if it were somehow inconclusive.
6. There is real wisdom in a well-formed question when dealing with antagonistic people:
 - a. It immediately took the pressure off of Himself, since it demonstrated that He was in control of His own spirit and that He had sufficient presence of mind to meet their potentially devastating question with a reasonable reaction.
 - b. It shifted the pressure of His questioners: they became the questioned.
 - c. It immediately enlisted all interested bystanders in cooperating together to formulate the proper answer. Each one who answers the question would line up emotionally with those whose answer approximates his own. This very procedure transforms the former threat by reorganizing its components along new, potentially helpful lines.
 - d. It turns everyone's attention away from personalities immediately involved in the antagonism and toward resolving the issue. As in our case here, the question must not merely divert the attention from the one attacked, but toward the correct solution of the problem that occasioned the attack.

- e. Such a question may cause the antagonists to think, to be reasonable, to consider. Sometimes it may lead them to see the irrationality of their prejudices.
7. One decisive question leads people to take a stand. Those who face it honestly, but had simply been confused by their background, might be persuaded to understand their confusion and abandon it. Further, the authorities' confusion, exposed in this public way, would not go unnoticed by those who had followed their leadership. This, in turn, would stimulate the followers not only to repudiate their blind shepherds, but, having recognized their fallibility, examine God's Word personally.
8. Prudence. To answer directly that He was the Messiah, God's Son, therefore qualified, would precipitate the final crisis at a time when there was yet much to be taught and done before the last hour. He refused to invite disaster by hurling Himself on the enemy's sword. As the Lamb of God in the midst of wolves, He was "as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves" (Matt. 10:16ff.), answering with great caution (cf. Prov. 15:28).

Whereas Jesus could have worked miracles to prove His right or perhaps cite Bible prophecies to support His claims, this time He adopted neither method of proof. Instead He lay before these schemers an unexpected, but fatal, dilemma:

21:25 The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven or from men? Who sent John to immerse people—God or men? **The baptism of John** is metonymy for John's total mission of which his baptism was that act whereby those who accepted his mission from God demonstrated their submission to God. The baptism in itself would have held only a ritual importance for an Israel already accustomed to various washings and proselyte baptisms. (Cf. Edersheim, *Life*, II, 745-747; I, 273f.; see also Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 200f.; also Josephus' warped view, *Ant.*, XVIII, 5, 2.) But because John had so intimately linked it with repentance toward God and personal preparation for the coming Messianic Kingdom of God, there could be no rejecting it without, at the same time, refusing the God who had sent him to call the nation to repentance.

Why bring up **the baptism of John**? Several reasons account for this:

1. John's *baptism* is either an invention of men or required by God. Jesus left His questioners no loop-hole: the question of his *baptism*

is acid-clear, (1) because no Old Testament text had predicted or ordered it, (2) because no Jewish group, especially the Essenes and the community at Qumran, practiced anything precisely identical to it, and (3) because his baptism "for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3) seemed to undermine the unique program for such forgiveness available through the right sacrifices by levitical priests in the temple.

Not even the Qumran community, with its multitudinous lustrations, thought of their admission of new converts to baptism in the same way John did. (Cf. John Allegro, *The Dead Sea Scrolls—A Reappraisal*, 2nd ed. 1964, p. 121f.; Jean Danielou, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Primitive Christianity*, 1958, p. 23). Josephus (*Wars*, II,8,2-13, esp. 7) says enigmatically, "[the proselyte to Essenism] is made a partaker of the waters of purification" which may mean initiation into the group or mere access to bathing regularly in the same water in common with "the pure." But Essene baptism is more a question of daily washings than initiatory preparation to fellowship in the community. That John's baptism was unique is eloquently evidenced even by Josephus whom some believe to have been an insider to Essenism, since he too describes John as "the Baptist." (Cf. his treatment of Essenism and other sects: *Ant.* XVIII,I,3-6; *Wars* II,8,2-13; and his *Life*, 2.)

The issue is this: was John right to introduce this rite?

2. Jesus, like John, had been sent directly by God, without human authorization from Jerusalem or from anywhere else. Standing outside the institutional structures of standard Judaism, and when challenged specifically on this point, John had claimed to be commissioned directly by God (John 1:33). Since the case of John and Jesus stand on the same footing, let the delegation decide about the former and they shall have their answer about the latter.
3. As observed before (see notes on 11:7, 14f.), the proper answer to the question, "Who is Jesus of Nazareth?" can be found in the correct answer to the other, "Who is John the Baptist?" For if it be determined that the latter is "a man sent from God" (John 1:6; Luke 3:2f.), and, consequently, his message and immersion as well, then his pointing out Jesus as God's Lamb (John 1:29), the One infinitely greater than John himself (John 1:27, 30), the One who has the Spirit (John 1:32f.), the Son of God (John 1:34),

should furnish the correct estimation of that authority by which Jesus ministered.

4. **The baptism of John** was objectively a previous revelation from God. Before Jesus will furnish new revelations of His identity, He must force them to face squarely the earlier ones, since openness to grasp new truth generally depends upon one's faithfulness and fairness in handling the previous truth.
5. In the mouth of these bigoted critics, the question, *Who gave you this authority?* means "What HUMAN authority?" since they presume the answer cannot be "God." If so, Jesus' reply really answers their challenge by saying: "John is God's messenger who prepared the way for me, baptized me and pointed me out to the world." In fact, it was at *the baptism of John* that Jesus was officially anointed to be a Prophet by the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:37f.) and proclaimed by the Father (John 5:32-36; 1:29-34).
6. Last, but not least, this was a question that even the simplest of the common people could AND DID answer to the satisfaction of God. (See notes on 21:31f.)

From heaven or from men? **From heaven?** is a respectful Hebraism meaning "From God" whose dwelling it is. (See notes on 23:22.) **From heaven or from men?** are the only alternatives (cf. Acts 5:38f.). The best, if not the only, escape from the horns of a dilemma is the formulation of a third alternative. But in this case there can be no third possibility, because, in the nature of the case, there are no other sources of prophetic inspiration. Even diabolic or drug-induced "inspiration" may be thought of as a subdivision of Jesus' expression "from men," inasmuch as these operate in deceived and deceptive men (cf. I Kings 22:22).

Although the leaders' question had been devious, because of its apparent interest in truth, Jesus' dilemma is a legitimate one that gets right at the heart of their deepest need and of that of His hearers. Because the rulers had scorned John's baptism and message, the Lord now requires that they openly confess it in the presence of the people they claimed to lead. If they declare themselves incompetent to decide John's case, they thereby disqualify themselves as judges of Jesus, but, even more critically, as master teachers of Israel. Since John had been a figure in Israel of such great religious significance, no one could ignore him without moral consequences. It was the duty of these authorities NOT to hedge or dodge the issue: John must be evaluated and that evaluation must be published.

If *they reasoned among themselves*, then how did the Evangelists learn the content of their deliberations? Probably the leaders talked in hoarse stage whispers in this on-the-spot consultation. Unless they deliberately retreated for a hasty conference, then it may not have been too difficult for by-standers to tune in on their debate.

If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why then did ye not believe him? Jesus knew that they did not believe John, but, if pushed by their answer to ask this question, He would have meant one of two things by it:

1. **Why did you not believe him** in what he said about your sins and need to repent so as to be ready for the coming Kingdom of God?
2. **Why did you not believe him** in his open and emphatic testimony to me, given before a priestly delegation from the Pharisees, that I am far greater than himself, even God's Son (John 1:19-34)?

With unerring insight born of calculating self-interest, these shrewd politicians recognized the political ramifications of their dilemma, and either way they are damned. To answer that John's message was really of divine origin but yet unbelieved by these very rulers, would instantly disqualify them as holy inquisitors in the name of God. To be exposed as crass unbelievers in a prophet of God at the very moment they are questioning Jesus' prerogatives to be just such a prophet, is to be totally disarmed for the task at which they should have been not merely legal experts but highly qualified morally. For anyone to admit that a given message or command is from God, and at the same time not to obey it, is the highest folly and deepest wickedness of which they can be accused.

21:26 But if we shall say, From men; we fear the multitude. The broken construction evident in their words is not proof of grammatical blundering on the part of the Gospel writer, but the accurate recording of the mental agitation of the holy inquisitors themselves! Here their true character is unmasked: rather than openly affirm their secret conviction that John was just another back-woods revivalist, but certainly not a prophet of God, rather than expose the decided judgment widely held by their colleagues in the Jewish Senate, they cower before public opinion. Luke (20:6) quotes them as fearing instant death by stoning at the hands of an aroused populace. *From men* had been their real choice made many months before, since they had examined John's testimony and had repudiated it (John 1:19ff.). They considered their rejection perfectly right-minded at

that time, because, in their view, John was self-sent. Now, under the psychological pressure of their own making, they hedge, because they cannot state their own true view publicly without political self-damage.

Another evaluation of their silence sees it as an unwitting admission that they recognized John as truly a God-sent prophet, for, it is argued, were they profoundly convinced they were right, there is no mob's fury they would not have braved, risking death to declare their convictions. Good evidence for this thesis are the Jews' many public demonstrations against Herodian or Roman policies, when they bared their breasts for Herod's vengeance or Roman slaughter, rather than submit meekly to compromise of conscience. (Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* XIV,13,1,2; XV,8,1-4; XVIII,3,1; *Wars*, II,9.2-4.) This position, however, assumes these politicians would have had more conscience than they did. It also forgets their unwillingness to part with popular support which they desperately needed in their rickety power structure.

We fear the multitude. Their glaring sin was that they did not fear GOD! Who cares if God is offended or dishonored by their deliberate refusal to confess embarrassing truth? In full awareness of their options they lied because of their previous opposition to truth. For them, the main question was not truth, but personal consequences. They could not care less whether or not John were really a prophet. Their prime concern was what answer would most successfully and most immediately defuse the live bomb Jesus had just handed them. Although they claimed to have the interest of true religion at heart, these proud men are actually animated by the dictates of political survival.

The ground of their hesitation was the almost universal conviction that *John was a true prophet* (cf. Mark 11:32). Although dead at this time, John's influence over people was very much alive and even continued on into the age of the Church. (Acts 18:24ff.; 19:1ff.; Josephus' testimony: *Ant.* XVIII,5,2.) Ironically, the common people, whom the authorities despised (John 7:49), actually held truer conclusions than their leaders and expressed greater freedom and conscientiousness in expressing their true belief! Had the authorities maintained their personal integrity and obeyed God as His will was revealed by John, they too could have maintained their position as leaders and would have had no basis for their present uneasiness.

CLUMSY EVASIVENESS

The reverend doctors solemnly intoned, "The point about which you ask is not one concerning which we are able to establish a scholarly consensus," which, stripped of its pompous language, translates into **21:27 We know not**. No one in Israel, called upon to give judgment about the ministry of a so-called "prophet" has the right to opt for this no-decision choice, since God had obligated all Israel to distinguish true prophets from false ones who lead His people into apostasy. (Cf. Deut. 13:1ff.; 18:9-22.) This shameful abdication of responsibility for a final judgment about John unquestionably ignores their God-given duty to know and decide. Further, it disqualifies them from asking credentials of ANYONE, for they would be as unable to judge the latter as they claimed in John's case.

We know not is a handy reply, because they believe no one on earth can disprove it, since it concerns their hidden thoughts. But a lie it was. They simply have no scruples about lying about their secret opinions. They merely hate the shame, not the sin, of deception. But even this deception is discovered, because the Lord did not react to their verbalized answer, **We know not**, but to their inward, suppressed answer, "We are not going to tell you," by saying, "**Neither will I tell you. . . .**" By so doing, He proved once more how rightly He read their inward thoughts which they feared to reveal. Ferrar's vivid evaluation of the situation (*Life*, 515) deserves repeating:

To say "We do not know," in this instance was a thing utterly alien to their habits, disgraceful to their discernment, a death-blow to their pretensions. It was ignorance in a sphere where ignorance was for them inexcusable. They, the appointed explainers of the Law—they, the accepted teachers of the people—they, the acknowledged monopolizers of Scriptural learning and oral tradition—and yet to be compelled, against their real convictions, to say, and that before the multitude, that they *could not tell* whether a man of immense and sacred influence—a man who acknowledged the Scriptures which they explained, and carried into practice the customs which they revered—was a divinely inspired messenger or a deluding imposter! Were the lines of demarcation, then, between the inspired prophet (*nahî*) and the wicked seducer (*mesîth*) so dubious and indistinct? It was a fearful humiliation, and one which they never either forgot or forgave!

JUSTIFIABLE REFUSAL

Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things. Their inability to pursue their question admits that their refusal to answer His questions cancels their own right to a reply from Him. However, although He was absolved from answering directly, as seen in what follows, He did not evade their question, because, in itself, it is a valid question worthy of a good answer. So He answered it parabolically. (See notes on 21:33—22:14, 41—46.)

I do these things echoes the wording of their question (21:23). However, He hereby also confirms that He is actually doing things that mark Him as the most significant spiritual phenomenon of the times. They could not formulate their original question: “By what right do you CLAIM to do these things?” because it was already painfully evident to them that the miracles, message and manners that characterized His ministry were incontestable facts.

Even though for the moment both Jesus and authorities are silent, their silence is for quite opposite reasons. Because of their cowardice, they CANNOT speak. Because of His justice, He WILL not speak. But the common people who witnessed the scene would have no doubt who had won. On the other hand, Plummer (*Matthew*, 294) suspects that at last in their own mind, Jesus’ enemies did actually gain headway in this round, since He did not publicly deny all claim to royal authority, in the same way He had been unwilling to hush the crowds (Luke 19:30f.) and the children (Matt. 21:15f.) who proclaimed Him their Messianic King. These refusals, when seen as tacit confessions, strengthened their case against Him both with the Romans and the Jewish Supreme Council.

III. “DECIDE ON AN OBJECTIVE CASE: TWO SONS” (21:28-32)

A. Rank Sinners and Religious Outcasts

21:28 **But what think ye?** Although Jesus had honorably and effectively bested His challengers psychologically, He is not satisfied to let them leave without help. Before they disperse, He presses them for further, possibly life-changing, decisions. **What think ye?** is His engaging way of eliciting their opinion. He invites them to THINK about a story that apparently has nothing to do either with their frustration and dishonorable failure in the face of His dilemma or

with His consequent refusal to submit to their pretended authority. This masterful approach defuses the tension by concentrating their attention on an interesting illustration. (Cf. 17:25; 18:12; 22:42.) The well-turned story has special value especially because of its decision-demanding question at the end. The Scripture records other highly effective illustrations built on his pattern (II Sam. 12:1-13; 14:1-24; I Kings 20:35-43; cf. Matt. 21:33-45).

A man had two sons. The *man* represents God; the *two sons* stand for (1) "the sinners," and (2) the hierarchy. The exquisite grace of Jesus pictures both as sons of the same father who tries to engage each son in useful work for Him. But there are only *two sons*, not three, as if there should have been another son who could both agree with and obey the father. Jesus omitted this concept, because there was simply no one who did that (cf. Rom. 3:10-23). **Go work today in the vineyard,** is the father's invitation to each boy to show himself a true and worthy son. The worthiness is not itself based upon HOW MUCH work each would eventually do, but upon WHETHER each would take up this precious invitation. This is the positive side of our obedience to the Father's will too. When Jesus applied this parable (vv. 31, 32), He identified those who please God and enter His Kingdom by pointing to flagrant sinners who believed His messenger and acted accordingly. Thus, the order to **go to work in the vineyard** is no mere merit system whereby each can earn so much praise for so much work, but

1. the practical procedure whereby people complete what the father needs done, and
2. the practical proof that each is truly the father's child, as he claims.

21:29 And he answered and said, I will not. The glaring disobedience the pious thought typical of publicans and harlots is not understated in this son's rude refusal: "I don't want to! (*ou thélo*)." Such an outrageous reaction springs from a rebellious heart that does not respect the father or fear the consequences. Such open, daring defiance illustrates an ungodliness almost proud of its rebellion.

Although not explicitly part of Jesus' story, He implies that the father did not instantly disinherit his boy because of this rebelliousness. He graciously left the son time to reconsider, and reconsider he did! This feature is perhaps intended to suggest how really typical of our Father not to want any to perish but all to come to repentance (II Peter 3:9; I Tim. 2:4; Matt. 18:10-14). This grace certainly leaves

the door open to what follows (cf. Rom. 2:4). **But afterward he repented himself.** *Metameletheis* might be better rendered: "he regretted it, or felt sorry for it." In fact this is not the normal New Testament word for repentance, *metanoéo*, which involves a change of mind and consequent action. In our text, it is true, the son actually did reverse his previous position by obeying the father, and the Jewish leaders should have done the same. (Cf. 21:32, *metemelèthete*.) However, Jesus' emphasis here is more on the remorse felt about previously bad conduct. A proper sorrow over reprehensible conduct can lead to genuine change (II Cor. 7:9-11), although this does not always happen, as in the case of Judas (Matt. 27:3). *Metamélomai* expresses primarily a change in feeling, not necessarily a change in conduct. This latter is to be discovered from the later actions which are the "fruits worthy of repentance" (*karpòn àxion tês metanoias*, cf. Matt. 3:8) John was really driving for. *He went*, thus showing himself a worthy child of his father, despite the bad beginnings.

B. Religious Professionals

21:30 **And he came to the second**, to offer this son too the same gracious opportunity to show himself a true son. **And he answered and said, I go, sir:** the cultured politeness and ready acquiescence of this boy mark a stark contrast with his brother. He very respectfully called his father "sir" (*kùrie*)! The suddenness with which he responded is breath-taking and an excellent example for our response everytime God assigns us work to do. However, *HIS I go, sir*, is but the smooth lie of someone who is too cowardly to rebel against his father's authority openly. Or is it that habitual courteousness that responds well, but, unsupported by conscience, has no serious intention to carry through such glib commitments? How appropriately he symbolized the cultured theologians standing there before Jesus! **He went not.** Despite his politeness and promises, he completely ignored his commitment to the father. These very religionists did not merely promise to do God's will. They actually convinced themselves that they were doing it! In fact, they could have scraped together "scholarly" reasons why their investigation of Jesus was the will of God (cf. John 16:2). But that "they say and do not" would be one of Jesus' charges against the Pharisees later (23:3). This form of godliness of which they were inexplicably proud, proves to be the most effective tool Satan uses to resist the power of real godliness (cf. II Tim. 3:5). They

supposed that religious forms equalled the power of righteousness and could not discern that the power of righteousness EVIDENT IN THE GREAT CONVERSIONS OF FLAGRANT SINNERS is true religion at its best!

C. The Punch Line

21:31 Which of the two did the will of his father? Despite the bad beginnings, who, in the final analysis, actually did what their father wanted? The crucial issue is DOING the will of God, not merely talking about it. This is true religion. (See notes on 6:10; 7:21; 9:13; 12:50; 28:20; Ps. 119; 143:10; John 15:14; Acts 5:29.) God is not so much interested in who said yes or no to Him at first, but who eventually responded in real obedience!

Without being obviously capricious, the authorities had to answer according to the justice of the case, whether they sensed the implications of His story or not. So, *they say, the first*. Anyone would prefer to deal with people who are better than their word—like the first son,—than with those who break it—like the second. And God Himself vindicates the justice of this choice in just such a case (Ezek. 18:21-28).

Verily I say unto you. . . . Since His opponents had taken sides on the moral principle in the story, Jesus now demonstrates how this principle applies to their situation. But perhaps no more shocking news faced these reverend clergymen than this: **The publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.** If Jesus is right, this has to be bad news for these and anyone else who suppose themselves to possess the best chance to get into God's glorious Messianic Kingdom. In fact, from their point of view, for anyone to state that men and women whom all the pious consider hopelessly wicked, irretrievably damned sinners, shall enjoy precedence to enter into that realm where only the righteous justly deserve welcome, is to subvert all sense of justice and holiness, and irresponsibly to distribute unmerited hope to the undeserving! That is, unless there is a far higher principle of justice that completely vindicates it. And while the scowling dignitaries fume and sputter, Jesus' explanation is not long in coming (v. 32). He had already intimated this principle earlier: "There will be a surprising reversal of common judgments of right and propriety." (See on 19:30; 20:16.)

The publicans and harlots serve as the basis of Jesus' contrast, because they were common examples of shameless disobedience to God in Jewish society.

1. *Publicans*, or tax-gatherers, because of the extortion, graft and greed associated with this occupation, were considered classic sinners. (See notes on 9:9.) Nevertheless, John's preaching brought men like these to repentance (Luke 3:12f.).
2. *Harlots*, or prostitutes, because of their gross sexual immorality (cf. Luke 15:30; I Cor. 6:15f.), furnished another classical example of conscienceless unfaithfulness mixed with brazen impurity (cf. Rev. 17:1f.). However, Hebrew history provided the astonishing example of a harlot saved from certain death because of her trusting the God of Israel (Heb. 11:31; James 2:25; Joshua 2:1-21; 6:22-25). So, women too, not just men, found the door of the Kingdom open to them—and on the same basis. (Cf. Luke 7:36-50; John 4:7ff.; 11:1ff.; 12:1ff.; Gal. 3:28.)

But these are both mentioned not only because of their gross sins, but because they are also examples of discerning people. Even these gross sinners could discern what the leadership pretended not to know: John's baptism is from God and *the publicans and the harlots* openly confessed it. They proved that it was POSSIBLE TO KNOW.

What went wrong that made "the righteous" miss the Kingdom and "the sinners" go flocking right in? The greatest stumbling-block in true religion does not lie in its symbols and dogmas, but in its intolerably austere treatment of human pride. The man of taste and culture cannot imagine himself saying, "Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to thy cross I cling." This self-humiliating need for divine help—at least for HIM—is nonsense and highly offensive to his sense of moral accomplishment. This very aversion felt by men of taste was notably lacking in those *publicans and harlots* not so overawed by their own sense of self-importance. In fact, unsurprised that John should verbally blister them for living corrupt lives, nevertheless, they were strangely moved by his exhortations, because he convinced them that God's Kingdom was open to all who repented—even those whom others would have rejected as hopelessly beyond recall. But the self-righteous, respectable people whose very profession proclaimed their supposed readiness to serve God, failed at the one business they professed to do.

The publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. A surprising turn is given to Jesus' word when *proàgousin* is rendered "they are leading you," in the sense that they go before, leading the way as they precede those who follow. (Cf. Arndt-Gingrich, 708f.; Rocci, 1556.) Whereas the hierarchy considered itself amply qualified

to lead the procession of the righteous into Messiah's Kingdom, Jesus asserts that it is "the sinful people" who would do the leading! Submission to God's rule is the key to entrance into His Kingdom, regardless of the epoch in which one surrenders throne, scepter and crown of his own life and turns all over to Jesus as Sovereign Lord. Anyone who submitted to God's will preached by John—even if these all died before Pentecost—showed the spirit of obedience God seeks. TO DO WHAT GOD DESIRES IS TO UNDERSTAND THE KINGDOM, and those who act like loyal subjects are IN THE KINGDOM. They willingly submit to whatever the King decrees, and they do it as soon as His will is made clear to them. John the Baptist has made it real for *the publicans and the harlots* like it had never been brought home to them before. However, if Jesus is referring strictly to the Church as *the Kingdom* (cf. notes on 11:11ff.), He is indicating the direction evident in the lives of John's converts and the result they would soon obtain because of their present mind-set.

THE WICKEDNESS OF UNBELIEF EXPOSED

Because this affirmation is so explosive, Jesus had better have some good reasons for it! Who could know for sure who has precedence in God's Kingdom? And who can prove on what basis he knows that much? However, for Jesus, the matter is cut and dried: 21:32 **For John came unto you in the way of righteousness.** It is because this fact is true that Jesus is able to affirm the precedence enjoyed by the "sinners" as opposed to the leaders, i.e. "they precede you into God's kingdom, a fact we know because John came to you in the way of righteousness and they believed him and you did not." Herein lies proof that John's ministry was from God: judge him by his fruits (Matt. 7:15-20). Even if you (falsely) claim not to know the source of John's inspiration, you MIGHT yet decide on the fruit of his work. While he did no miracle (John 10:41), the direction and results of his teaching coupled with his own personal example should tell you something meaningful about him:

1. **HIS CHARACTER:** John himself walked **in the way of righteousness**, a life of obedience to God's will. Can you find fault with that? The grosser sinners, usually keenest to discern pretense in the sanctimonious, detected nothing insincere about John's unvarying seriousness about righteousness. They found his piety convincing, genuine. Does not the fruit of righteousness evident in his own life give credence to his prophetic missions?

2. **HIS MINISTRY ITSELF:** Was John's doctrine of repentance and righteousness strange and new? Was it not rather that old, familiar, prophetic challenge to deeds, not words, and to real piety, not promises, characteristic of all Old Testament religion? Did he not teach you to fast, give alms and pray? (Luke 3:10-14; 11:1; Matt. 9:14f.) The high irony, then, is that when someone else came preaching the highest ideals of Jewish religion, its own leaders could not recognize it as from God, but haughtily spurned its lofty, spiritual demands (Luke 3:10-14)!
3. **HIS SUCCESS:** "The world's worst sinners," by your definition, were turning to God under his preaching! His marvelous success among the worst of people should indicate the Lord's blessing and approval of his efforts. (Cf. Paul's labors among similarly wicked Corinthians, I Cor. 6:9-11; 9:1, 2!) John brought people closer to repentance and to God than they had ever been, and yet the leadership of the nation could not discern in this any evidence of God's authorization?!

NOTE: Whereas this pragmatic test is not valid when considered alone, because temporary successes cannot guarantee final success with God, yet taken in context with the other tests mentioned, it becomes striking proof of John's validity. After all, had not the religious leaders tried without success to bring these very people to God, and had not they miserably failed? Now that it is well-known that John brought these very sinners to repentance, should not this prove SOMETHING about the validity of his approach? Still, numerical success alone is not a final test of rightness. Remember Noah! (I Peter 3:20)

John came to YOU: his mission had not excluded the Jewish rulers merely because his following came largely, if not exclusively, from the common people of the working class. **And ye believed him not.** It is significant that NOT ONE rabbi questioning Jesus raised his voice in protest. To the man they had all turned John down!

But the publicans and the harlots believed him, and although coming from a life of flagrant, open rebellion against God, moved by remorse for sin, they justified God's righteous judgment against their sins (Luke 7:29f.). They yielded to His claims on their lives, surrendered their sins, committed themselves to a life of obedience and moved right onto the way of righteousness.

And ye, when ye saw it, did not even repent yourselves afterward. What, according to Jesus, should they have discerned in John's

conversions, to be convinced to yield themselves too? If, by the hierarchy's own definitions, the publicans and harlots were the most hardened sinners and farthest from conversion to God and righteousness, and if John is actually drawing them into heart-felt repentance, surely the hand of God Himself must be upon this ministry! Out of this conclusion come some others:

1. The hierarchy should have clearly supported and encouraged the labors of the wilderness preacher.
2. Each member of the religious community should have personally and humbly submitted to his teaching.
3. And, if in the ministry of John they could thus discern God's direction and authority, they should have taken seriously what he said about Jesus as Messiah.

Ironically, they had simply written it all off as mere religious fervor and froth, suitable perhaps for the "truly sinful," but not a matter of concern for "the righteous," i.e. for themselves.

"*Afterward*, when there was ample time for serious reflection upon the amazing changes produced in the lives of formerly hardened sinners, *afterward*, in the quiet of theological reflection with abundant opportunity to re-examine the theological ramifications of John's position in the light of his results, you still did not feel sorry enough about your previous rejection to begin believing him." There was much in the leaders' life and theology that kept them from gladly joining the ranks of John's disciples:

1. Pride of position: they felt no need to regret their choice, as they were already righteous enough to enjoy the approval of God.
2. They suspected what they could not control. John had not been authorized by them, hence, however successful, they must regard him with suspicion.
3. John was stubbornly determined to help those whom the leadership despised and ignored as incorrigible and unworthy of further effort.

You did not repent so that you could believe him (*oudè metemelèthete hùsteron toû pisteûsai autô*). Note the order: repentance, or better, regret must precede faith in their case. They could not believe, because they were reluctant to regret their former choice, consequently they hardened themselves in their error. Until a radical change of sentiment occurred, until they repudiated their original blindness,

psychologically they would never bring themselves to believe John. In their state of heart, belief could never occur. Totally unlike the first son (21:29), they felt no heartache, no grief or sorrow at having disappointed their Father and God. What moral perversity it must take to mingle among the participants in the nation's greatest moral revival and remain totally unaffected by it, and worse, publicly disclaim all ability to discern its origin in God! What incontrovertible deafness not to be able to hear the familiar voice of the God of Israel in the accents of His wilderness preacher!

And yet there is no indication in Jesus' words that the gates of the Kingdom had been shut, or that these often unscrupulous religionists could not even yet reverse themselves. By not affirming, "But for you it is too late," He implies that there is yet time to repent. This same conclusion is assured by Jesus' use of the present tense: "The publicans and harlots are going ahead of you." Even if others had preceded the hierarchy, these could still follow their lead—if they really desired to do the Father's will.

Matthew Henry (V,306) is correct to see that Jesus' parable has far wider application than Jesus gave it that day, precisely because of the principles involved: "The Gentiles were *sometimes disobedient*, had been long so, children of disobedience, like the elder son (Titus 3:3f.), yet, when the gospel was preached to them, they became obedient to the faith; whereas the Jews who said, *I go, sir*, promised fair (Exod. 24:7; Josh. 24:24); yet went not. . . ." However, Jesus' illustration does not refer directly and primarily to the Jew-Gentile question, but to those two groups of Judaism, "the best" and "the worst."

This text has far-reaching ramifications for evangelism and eschatology too. How can anyone, contrary to this text, affirm that prior to the Lord's return all Israel will somehow sweep into the Kingdom of Christ by mass conversion? If, in the day of John and Jesus, Israel divided itself into two categories: believers and unbelievers, what could unite them but common trust in God's Christ without which it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6)? As long as modern Israel remains closed to open evangelism, what solid hope is there for their "end-times, sweeping conversion"? They must be led to repentance as anyone else who claims inability to believe.

FACT QUESTIONS

1. According to Mark, where had Jesus been with His disciples when they arrived in the temple?
2. Who were the chief priests and elders? What is the significance of their coming to ask the question posed in our text?
3. In what activity was Jesus engaged when the authorities approached Him?
4. Furnish other incidents in Scripture where similar requests for credential were made (a) of Jesus and (b) of other God-sent prophets and apostles.
5. How did Jesus respond to the hierarchy's challenge to His authority?
6. Explain the importance of Jesus' question concerning John the Baptist and the origin of his baptism. What is meant by "from heaven" and "from men"? On what basis should anyone in Israel—its leadership especially—have been able to decide that John the Baptist was a true prophet?
7. How did the authorities react to the dilemma involved in Jesus' question about John's baptism? That is, what was the gist of their deliberations?
8. What was the final answer the hierarchy gave to Jesus' dilemma? Why did they give this particular answer?
9. What was Jesus' final answer to the authorities' challenge of His authority? Why did He answer as He did?
10. What story did Jesus tell to illustrate the moral situation in Israel represented by these religious authorities as opposed to others in Israel?
11. In what way were the two sons in Jesus' story precisely alike?
12. What fundamental difference distinguished the two sons?
13. Who or what is represented by (a) the father? (b) by each boy?
14. What is the crucial question Jesus asked to underline the fundamental lesson of His story?
15. Who or what in Jewish society were the "tax collectors and the harlots"?
16. In this text what does it mean "to go into the kingdom of God"?
17. On what basis does Jesus assert that the flagrant sinners would enjoy precedence over the religious leaders?
18. What is "the way of righteousness" wherein John had come to Israel? How does Jesus' affirmation state the divine source of John's authority?

19. When did the religious leaders see the conversions of publicans and harlots, which should have convinced them to submit themselves too?
20. What evidences of Jesus' divine majesty stand out in this incident?

SECTION 57

JESUS MEETS CHALLENGES TO HIS AUTHORITY: THREE PARABLES OF WARNING

TEXT: 21:33-46

C. The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen

33 Hear another parable: There was a man that was a householder, who planted a vineyard, and set a hedge about it, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into another country. 34 And when the season of the fruits drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, to receive his fruits. 35 And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them in like manner. 37 But afterward he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son. 38 But the husbandmen, when they saw the son, said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and take his inheritance. 39 And they took him, and cast him forth out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 When therefore the lord of the vineyard shall come, what will he do unto those husbandmen?

41 They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those miserable men, and will let out the vineyard unto other husbandmen, who shall render him the fruits in their seasons.

42 Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures,
The stone which the builders rejected,
the same was made the head of the corner;
This was from the Lord,
And it is marvellous in our eyes?

43 Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. 44 And he that falleth on this stone shall be broken to pieces: but upon whomsoever it shall fall, it will scatter him as dust.

45 And when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables,

they perceived that he spake of them. 46 And when they sought to lay hold on him, they feared the multitudes, because they took him for a prophet.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Is this story a “parable” in the modern sense of the word, or an allegory? What other “parables” of Jesus help you to decide?
- b. On the basis of what elements in Jesus’ story could the religious authorities in Israel have correctly concluded that Jesus had told this parable against them?
- c. Why did not Jesus launch His accusations directly at the authorities, instead of hiding His intentions under the form of a parable? What advantage is there in the use of a parable, as compared with an open declaration? Is this cowardice?
- d. In what way does this parable reveal the larger plan of God for the world? That is, who is the owner of the vineyard? Who or what is the vineyard? What were the owner’s preparations for the positive development of the vineyard? In what sense did the owner go away from his vineyard? Who are the tenant farmers? What is the significance of the fact that they are tenants? When is the season of the fruit of this vineyard? When, or in what way, would the wicked farmers be punished? Who are the other tenant farmers to whom this vineyard would be entrusted after the failure of the first?
- e. Why do you think Jesus chose this particular Psalm to convince His listeners of the rightness of what He was saying in the parable?
- f. Why should the meek and gentle Jesus predict the horrible destructions of everyone who goes against Him? Does not this ruin His image?
- g. The religious leaders wanted to kill Jesus, but they could not capture Him, because they feared the people who considered Him a prophet. What does this say about the depth and quality of these leaders’ convictions?
- h. Notwithstanding the well-merited punishment of the wicked tenant farmers suggested in the story, what evidence is there in the story itself that testifies to the long-suffering mercy shown them by the vineyard’s owner?
- i. Can you give a plausible reason why Jesus would leave the owner’s son dead in His parable? After all, whom does that son represent?

- j. In what way does this parable furnish the answer to the leaders' original challenge to Jesus' authority? ("By what authority do you do these things, and who gave you this authority?")
- k. Jesus pictures the owner of the vineyard as one who sincerely thinks that the tenant farmers could respect his son. On the basis of what factors could he hope this much, notwithstanding the ill-treatment suffered by all his previous agents? Although this element seems to be a weak point in Jesus' story, it could be one of His most meaningful points. Can you see what Jesus was driving at?
- l. In what sense could the Kingdom be taken away from anyone to give it to others? To what phrase or expression of the Kingdom is Jesus referring here? (Hint: in what sense had the Hebrews already known "the kingdom" before the coming of Christ?)
- m. In your opinion, what is the fruit of the Kingdom of God that the Owner of the vineyard expects from its new tenant farmers? (Clue: what was it that God desired for so many centuries from the people of Israel, but so rarely received?)
- n. Do you think Jesus was moved to tell this story because of the hierarchy's belligerent behavior on this occasion alone, or does it go deeper than that, i.e. does it spring from other situations also? Why do you think so?
- o. How many messengers of God have come to you to bring word from the owner of the universe? What did you do with them? How many more must come before
 - (1) you turn over to God all the fruit of your life that He expects?
 - (2) He comes to judge you for your handling of what He has intrusted to you?
 - (3) or He takes away your administration and gives it to others who will produce what He desires?

PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Then Jesus began conversing with the other people in His audience, by narrating this illustration: "Listen to another story. Once upon a time there was a man, head of his house, who planted a vineyard. He fenced it round with a hedge. In it he dug a pit in which to stomp grapes, and constructed a watch tower. After renting it out to tenant farmers, he took a trip into a distant country for a long time.

"When the vintage time came around, he sent some of his slaves to the sharecroppers to collect from them his share of the grape

harvest. But those farm workers attacked his men and beat up one and sent him off empty-handed. They murdered another and drove a third with stones. Nevertheless, he kept it up. In fact, he sent other slaves, more numerous than the first group, but they treated them the same way. One they beat up, wounding him on the head, grossly insulted him and ran him off without collecting. Another they wounded, then killed him and heaved his body over the wall. Although the landowner persevered in sending them many others, they abused them all in the same way.

“As a last resort the owner of the vineyard had one man left, his own dear son. So he thought, ‘What am I to do now? I will send my own son: surely they will at least respect him!’ So, last of all, he sent his beloved son to them.

“But when those tenant farmers sighted the son coming, they plotted among themselves, ‘This fellow is the future owner. Come on, let’s kill him, so that what he inherits will be ours!’ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard and murdered him. Now, when the vineyard’s owner comes, how do you think he will deal with those sharecroppers?”

Some of Jesus’ listeners responded, “He will come and give those wicked men a punishment their behavior deserves! Then he will lease his vineyard to other farm workers who will give him what he expects promptly—when they are supposed to!”

But other listeners, when they heard this, cried, “May that never happen!”

Nonetheless, Jesus looked them right in the face and demanded, “What does the Bible text (Psalm 118:22f.) mean when it says,

The very stone which the builders threw away
has become the keystone.

This cornerstone came from the Lord
and it is wonderful to see?

Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but when it falls on anyone, it will grind him to powder. This is the reason why I can tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and awarded to a people that will really produce the fruits of the kingdom.”

When the theologians, the hierarchy and the Traditionalists heard His stories, they rightly understood that He was referring to them. They kept trying to get their hands on Him right then, but they feared the crowds, because the people considered Jesus to be a prophet.

SUMMARY

Jesus' next story concerned a vineyard (= the Kingdom of God in Israel) for which its owner (= God) made every possible provision, hedge, wine press and tower. He turned it over to tenant farmers (= the Jewish leadership) to care for it and give him the returns he required (= righteousness). But at the harvest season (= the reckoning), when he sent his servants (= the prophets) to get his share, they were mistreated and murdered by the tenants (= the leadership). Last of all, the owner (= God) sent his own son (= Jesus), but he too, like the servants, was rejected and murdered, because the sharecroppers hoped thereby to guarantee his property for themselves. Jesus called for a judgment: what will this owner (= God) do to the tenants (= the Jewish leadership)? Some answered, "He'll give them the horrible death they deserve and turn the vineyard (= the Kingdom of God) over to another people (= Christians)." Others balk, "Never!" Jesus insisted that Psalm 118:22f. is going to come true: Through God's efforts the Rejected Stone will be exalted to great glory, but it will be the Stone that crushes all who attack it. The cowardly leadership recognized His meaning, but was impotent to muzzle Him, because they feared popular reprisals.

NOTES

IV. JESUS REVEALS GOD'S PROGRAM

A. Bountiful Mercy (v. 33)

21:33 **Hear another parable:** were Jesus' attackers even that moment slithering toward the exit? If so, this invitation to hear another story blocks their escape by boldly announcing that the session is not over. Luke (20:9) informs us that, while not completely ignoring the sweaty-handed authorities, Jesus turned His direct attention specifically to the people. By eliciting a clear judgment from commoners concerning the criminal conduct of the vicious sharecroppers (v. 41), He showed that ANYONE could correctly evaluate and vindicate God's justice in punishing Israel's leaders, as He eventually would. By shifting His attention to the people, Jesus is not attacking the nation as a whole rather than its rulers. Rather, He lays bare the ruler's primary guilt and responsibility, and, by reflection, that of anyone else who agreed, in thought and behavior, with the nation's leaders. Sadly, of these there were many (John 1:11). In this sense, then, the whole nation is addressed in the person of its representative leadership (Hos. 4:6-9).

Another parable means that the story of the Two Sons is clearly a parable, even if Matthew does not so label it. But it is more than just *another*, since it carries forward the germ-ideas of the foregoing story and leads directly into the third. Compare them, noting the progression and intensity of thought as Jesus proceeds:

PARABLE OF THE TWO SONS	PARABLE OF WICKED HUSBANDMEN	PARABLE OF THE MARRIAGE FEAST
<p>Matt. 21:28-32 OBEDIENCE</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Work in the Father's Vineyard is offered to two classes of individuals. 2. Stress is laid upon the leadership's rejection of John the Baptist despite good reasons to submit to him. 3. Rejection of John the Baptist will cost rebels their entrance into God's Kingdom. 4. God's permission to enter His Kingdom is not based on men's unfulfilled pious promises, but on obedience. This threatens all Jewish complacency grounded solely on empty pietism or carnal descent from Abraham. 5. God's dealings are based on actual performance, not on empty promises. This could potentially justify Gentile participation in Kingdom. 6. God's dealings are with individuals as evidenced in different treatment accorded the two sons of the same father. 	<p>Matt. 21:33-46 RESPONSIBILITY</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Care of the Owner's Vineyard is the basis of this story. 2. Stress is laid upon Jewish rejection of all of God's prophets culminating in their assassination of His Son. 3. Rejection of God's prophets and assassination of His Son will cost its perpetrators their lives and privileged position in God's Kingdom. 4. God's dealing with Israel (Matt. 21:33-41a). <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. God's gracious provision for Israel's blessing (33f). b. Israel's ingratitude and rejection (35-39). 5. God's dealing with the Gentiles (21:41b-43). <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Punishment of Jews (40f) b. Blessing of Gentiles (41b-43) 6. God's dealings with other peoples are always based on "producing the fruits of" the Kingdom, something of which, in the final analysis, only individuals are capable. God's dealing with individuals is especially evident in this: "Everyone who falls . . . it falls on any one." (vv. 44; Luke 20:18) 	<p>Matt. 22:1-14 PRIVILEGE</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gracious opportunity to enjoy the King's bounty is the basis of this story. 2. Stress is laid upon majority Jewish rejection of all of God's invitations given through His prophets, culminating in their killing them. 3. Rejection of God's offers will cost impenitents their lives and the destruction of their city, while non-Hebrews will be admitted to the Kingdom's privileges. 4. God's dealing with Israel (Matt. 22:2-7). <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. God's gracious provision for Israel's blessing (2-4) b. Israel's ingratitude and rejection (5, 6). 5. God's dealings with the Gentiles (22:8-10). <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Punishment of Jews (7) b. Blessing of Gentiles (8-10) 6. God's dealings with individual Christians (22:11-14) is always based on each's doing what God expected of him, i.e. wearing the wedding garment.

Study this parable from three points of view: what it reveals about (1) God, (2) Man and (3) Jesus. This story borders on the apocalyptic in that it telescopes into one pithy illustration past, present and (then) future events in the history of the people of God, all expressed in symbols. We see their past rebelliousness and ingratitude, their (then) present unfaithfulness in refusing God's Christ and their punishment, if not also their final destruction.

There was a man that was a householder, who planted a vineyard. This introduction was well-calculated to stir interest, because, as A.B. Bruce (*P.H.C.*, XXIII,434) recognized,

At most this parable is but an old theme worked up with new variations. Every one who heard it knew what the vineyard with its hedge, winepress and tower signified, and who the vine-dressers were, and who the servants, sent for the fruits. These phrases belonged to the established religious dialect of Israel, as much as pastor, flock, lambs of the flock, Zion, etc. do to ours, used by us all without consciousness that we are speaking in figures.

Making use of this language, then, the Lord is not so much hiding His meaning under obscure allusions, as taking an old, well-known and well-loved story and giving it new meaning. In fact, His words quite closely echo the Septuagint version of Isaiah's celebrated allegory. (Isa. 5:1-7; cf. other parallel figures: Isa. 27:1-7; Ps. 80:7-19; Jer. 2:21; Ezek. 15:1-6; 17:1-15; 19:10-14; Hos. 10:1.) Whereas the prophet's "Son of the Vineyard" emphasizes the quality of the vineyard's yield, Jesus' version gives importance to the sharecroppers' conduct. The pedagogical value of this procedure is unmistakable:

1. A well-known story with a new twist sparks the curiosity of the listener: "I have already heard a story similar to this, but where is He taking it?"
2. Further, Jesus assured Himself a sympathetic hearing, similar to that which Stephen enjoyed while he recounted significant points of Hebrew history (Acts 7).
3. While Jesus' detractors were even now accusing Him of standing outside the pale of Old Testament religion, He paints a canvas of Old Testament history showing His proper place in all that had occurred before His coming. At the same time, He left it beyond doubt that His appearance in Israel was the last, decisive act of