

Matthew Chapter 21-23 – Jesus’ Jerusalem Ministry – Part 2  
Matthew 21:12-27 – The Authority of Jesus  
Jesus is Revealed to Jerusalem

## Introduction

Matthew 19-23 is an account of Jesus’ final Judean ministry; He is in this region for 6-9 months. During this time, Jesus, with the disciples, is going in and out of Jerusalem, healing the crowds and increasing the faith of the disciples while refuting challenges from the leadership sects in Jerusalem. Matthew 21-23 tells of Jesus’ final Jerusalem ministry. It begins with an announcement and, over the time of about a week, Jesus comes in and out of the city, and this is when Jesus and the Jewish leadership have many direct confrontations.

In Matthew 21:1-11, Jesus is announced to the city with Him riding in on a colt, a beast of burden, with the crowd that was following Him and announcing His arrival with, “Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.”

The physical representation of Jesus on the colt with the statement of the crowd indicates a clear announcement that Jesus comes into Jerusalem announcing that He is the Messiah King of Israel.

## Matthew 21:12-17 – The Authority of Jesus in the Temple

Jesus entered the temple – There is a question about the timing of this situation. In Mark, Jesus enters and leaves, then comes back and drives out the money changers and merchants. Also, in Mark, the cursing of the fig tree happens in two stages. Jesus curses the fig tree on the next day as He re-enters Jerusalem, and, on the next day, it was noticed that the fig tree had withered.

Is this a discrepancy? No, in this situation, Mark gives an action-by-action account. Matthew simply records events without regard to exact chronology.

The distance from the entry of the city, where Jesus entered, to the temple entrance is very short. Jesus would not have had to traverse the entire city. He would just enter the city and in a few moments be in the temple.

When Jesus enters the temple, He drives the money changers and merchants out. *Drive out* is the Greek word “ἐκβάλλω ekballo.” This literally means to throw or cast out. This language indicates that Jesus assumed authority and exercised that authority in the temple. How did He throw them out? Did He use a whip?

John 2:13-23 – Is this the same situation? If it is, it is obviously chronologically out of order. Jesus enters Jerusalem on a colt in John 12. In that account, there is no driving out of the merchants.

My theory is this: every time Jesus went to Jerusalem and to the temple, He would drive out the merchants. The first time He did this, he made a whip. This time Jesus drives them out but does not need a whip.

Why were money changers and merchants in the temple? Temple sacrifices were supposed to be either from the family’s supply or purchased. The temple authorities expedited this by having the sacrifices for sale on the temple grounds. Because visitors would come with foreign currencies,

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moneychangers were there to help facilitate buying sacrifices. The fact that Jesus calls it a robber’s den indicates that the practice was inherently used to take advantage of visitors.

After Jesus threw out the merchants, He set up a place in the temple. There the blind and the lame came to Him to be healed, and Jesus healed them.

Verse 15 shows the jealous nature of the chief priests and the scribes and the fact that they had no authority. The children, seeing all these things, reacted in a true and godly way. The chief priests and scribes saw the same things and reacted with jealous anger. They did not tell the children to stop; they appealed to Jesus to tell them to stop. When Jesus claimed and exercised His authority, He could not be thwarted.

Jesus then affirms what they are saying and asks if they have ever read Psalm 8. This psalm is a Messianic Kingdom psalm of praise. Jesus’ reference, along with what He was doing and what the children were saying, is a clear indication of who Jesus was. Obviously, the chief priests knew the Scriptures very well, but they only cared about the portions they could use to exert power.

Jesus then leaves the chief priests and scribes. This is a walk away; Jesus did not want to spend another moment with them. Jesus then proceeded to Bethany.

**Matthew 21:18-22 – The Authority of Jesus Over Nature – A Lesson of Faith**

Jesus is human (He is also God); in His humanity, He became hungry as He was walking from Bethany back to Jerusalem. Then a strange thing happens – Jesus sees a lone fig tree, goes to it, and it has no fruit. Then Jesus says, “No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you.” Then the fig tree withered.

What is this about? The most popular understanding is this instance is not about fruit or nature but about Israel. Most hold that the fig tree is a depiction of the nation Israel, and that Jesus is rejecting the leadership of Israel because of their failure to produce fruits, as the message of “repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” calls for.

The leadership of Israel, being both the gatekeeper and key master of the Hebrew Text, oppresses the people and keeps them from entering the kingdom. They showed all the outward signs of a good nation and leadership, just like the fig tree, but there was no fruit.

If you read books on customs and manners of the Bible, it would state that “...the fig tree served as an emblem of the Jewish nation.” Some will admit this, but some do not. But this fig tree emblem is in the Talmud, however, not stated in the Scriptures. Regardless, Jesus may have used this understanding and situation to describe Israel as that barren fig tree. I will state that this is possible contextually, in that Jesus is rejecting them because they rejected Him. But this is only inferred. The text does not explain this point, Jesus only teaches a lesson on faith to the disciples.

The explanation of it being about the rejection of Israel is very appealing, but I cannot make it stand up. I urge all to proceed with this interpretation with caution.

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The lesson from the text is one of faith. The apostles would also have authority over nature. They were to take His words and believe them without internal deliberation about whether or not it was true. Jesus tells them if they believe what He is telling them about their authority and act in accordance with the will of God, nothing would be able to stand up to them.

Skipping ahead to the book of Acts, the apostles did just as Jesus told them. They healed the lame and sick and raised the dead. When they ran into problems, they would pray, and obstacles would be removed (Acts 12:1-11).

Do we need to state for the record that this is not about us?

**Matthew 21:23-27 – The Authority of Jesus Challenged**

This account is very straightforward. Jesus is in the temple, and chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him asking by what authority He was doing these things.

Observations:

Their standing orders from Jerusalem were to accuse Jesus of working with the authority of Satan.

This is the first time the elders came to Jesus to ask Him a question. Who are the elders?

The Nation of Israel was an elder-run nation from the time of the Exodus.

Exodus 3:16-18, 4:29, 19:1-7, 24:9-11; Leviticus 4:13-15

Israel was a representative government; the elders spoke for all the people.

The elders did not make accusations themselves, probably because they knew that tactic has had no effect.

Jesus does not let them have any authority and asked them a question He knew they could not answer – who is John the Baptizer? What was the source of his baptism?

They understood the trap, so they said they did not know. Notice that their contemplation was not an honest thought.

Because of their dishonesty, Jesus refused to engage with their question.