



The Gospel of Mark - Chapter Eleven

III. Mark 8:27-16:8 - Testing Jesus' Authority in Suffering (continues)

Summary of Chapter Eleven

It was the start of Passion Week. Jesus was approaching Jerusalem for the final time during his earthly ministry and instructed two of his disciples to go ahead to a village where they would find a donkey's foal. They were to bring it to Jesus so that he could ride on it into Jerusalem, thus fulfilling the ancient prophecy that the Messiah would come to his people in such a manner.

Jesus rode triumphantly into the city to a rapturous welcome from the people, who were laying their cloaks and palm branches in his path, crying out Hosanna, offering a welcome fit for their long awaited king. He went straight to the temple but did not stay there as it was late, so he left the city and went out onto the Mount of Olives, returning to the village of Bethany.

The next morning, as he headed again for Jerusalem, Jesus came to a fig tree in leaf but with no fruit. So he cursed the fig tree within the hearing of his disciples, never to bear fruit again.

In the city, Jesus cleared all the traders and money changers out of the temple courts, accusing them of desecrating his Father's house. Jesus taught that Scripture instructed them that the temple was to be a house of prayer for all nations. When the religious leaders heard what he had done, they were afraid of Jesus and plotted to kill him.

The next morning, Jesus and his disciples were again heading into the city when they came to the fig tree that Jesus had cursed. It had withered. This amazed his disciples, for the fig tree was symbolic of God's people in Scripture, so Jesus taught them on the power of faith and efficacy of prayer, so that God would give them what they needed while forgiving them their sins.

He went again to the Temple courts where he was immediately challenged by the religious leaders as to what authority he had to do and teach the things he was doing and saying. In return he asked them a question concerning John's

baptism, which they refused to answer. In turn, Jesus would not answer their questions about him.

III.b Mark 11:1-13:37 - Entering and judging Jerusalem

This section is the start of the final six days, which were the culmination or capstone of Jesus' earthly ministry. Jesus entered Jerusalem triumphantly, he cleansed the temple, and he authoritatively taught both opponents and disciples.

III.b.i Mark 11:1-11 - Jesus Comes to Jerusalem as King

Jesus entered Jerusalem upon a donkey's colt and was hailed as the triumphant Messiah of Israel. The Triumphal Entry, marked by Palm Sunday, is recorded in all four Gospel accounts, which should be read together to give the fullest picture of this great occasion.

¹ As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples,

Mark 11:1

Jesus, his disciples and the pilgrims headed for Bethphage and Bethany, on their way to Jerusalem. Jesus entered Jerusalem by the way of the Mount of Olives and the Kidron Valley.

The Mount of Olives or Olivet, with its spectacular view of the Temple Mount, stands just east of Jerusalem across the Kidron



Modern day Bethany

Valley. Jesus and his disciples regularly crossed over Olivet on their way from Jerusalem through Bethphage to Bethany, which lay on the mountain's eastern slope. The traditional site of Gethsemane lies on Olivet's western slope.

This is the Bethany identified in John 11:18 as being at least 2 miles or 3.2 km from Jerusalem. The village is the Bethany most commonly mentioned in the Gospels but it is different from the Bethany mentioned in: <<*This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising*>> (John 1:28). This is almost certainly the modern village El-Azariyeh, an Arabic place-name, which likely recalls the name of Lazarus and lies on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives. A 4th Century chapel was built over a rock-cut tomb, traditionally thought to have been the tomb of Lazarus. Other 1st Century tombs are found in the hillside around this chapel.

² saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here.

Mark 11:2

You will find a colt tied there. In the first Gospel it is written: <<As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me>> (Matthew 21:1-2), which also mentions that the mother donkey was with her colt, but Mark only mentions the colt, which was of most importance because Jesus would ride on it, not the mother. However, having the mother along would make sense as it would calm the young colt when it experienced the cacophony of sound from the crowd as they welcomed Jesus into the city.

Which no one has ever ridden. An unbroken colt would normally be very difficult to manage but not for Jesus, who is Lord of all things: <<You made him a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honour, putting everything in subjection under his feet.” Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him>> (Hebrews 2:7-8 ESV), perhaps also alluding to the eventual subjection of all men to him: <<But a stupid man will get understanding when a wild donkey's colt is born a man!>> (Job 11:12 ESV).

An unbroken colt would probably have a symbolic meaning similar to that of other beasts of burden that were unyoked: <<This is a requirement of the law that the Lord has commanded: Tell the Israelites to bring to you a red heifer without defect or blemish and that has never been under a yoke>> (Numbers 19:20), <<Then the elders of the town nearest the body shall take a heifer that has never been worked and has never worn a yoke>> (Deuteronomy 21:3), and: <<Now then, get a new cart ready, with two cows that have calved and have never been yoked. Hitch the cows to the cart, and take their calves away and pen them up>> (1 Samuel 6:7).

³ If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.’”

Mark 11:3

If anyone asks you. Such was the reputation that Jesus now had that his disciples would simply be able to tell the owners that the colt was for the Lord, i.e. the Lord needs it, and that they would take their word that they will send it back here shortly.

This level of acceptance was befitting a king: <<Araunah said, “Why has my lord the king come to his servant?” “To buy your threshing floor,” David answered, “so I can build an altar to the Lord, that the plague on the people may be stopped.” Araunah said to David, “Let my lord the king take whatever he wishes and offer it up. Here are oxen for the burnt offering, and here are threshing sledges and ox yokes for the wood. Your Majesty, Araunah gives all this to the king.” Araunah also said to him, “May the Lord your God accept you”>> (2 Samuel 24:21-23).

⁴ They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, ⁵ some people standing there asked, “What are you doing, untying that colt?” ⁶ They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go.

Mark 11:4-6

They went and found a colt, tied at a doorway. Mark makes no mention of the disciples being amazed to find things just as Jesus said they would be. Perhaps they were at last coming to understand his true nature. They would experience this again within a week when Jesus sent them to find the room for the Passover meal: <<*So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him”*>> (Mark 14:13), followed by: <<*The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover*>> (Mark 14:16).

⁷ When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it.

Mark 11:7

Jesus fulfilled a prophecy about the Messiah: <<*Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey*>> (Zechariah 9:9), by riding on a donkey’s colt. Jesus is depicted as the humble shepherd-king, who comes to the Holy City to take his rightful place. An early messianic prophecy speaks of a ruler from Judah who, riding on a donkey, would command the obedience of all nations. Part of the Zechariah prophecy also comes from: <<*The Lord has made proclamation to the ends of the earth: “Say to Daughter Zion, ‘See, your Saviour comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him’”*>> (Isaiah 62:11).

In the longer messianic prophecy mentioned, which acknowledged that the Saviour would come from the line of his son Judah, a dying Jacob said: <<*The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his. He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch; he will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes*>> (Genesis 49:10-11).

In Zechariah, it is an example of Hebrew poetic parallelism, where an idea is stated twice, in successive lines, using slightly different wording.

⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields.

Mark 11:8

Many people spread their cloaks in recognition of Jesus’ kingship: <<*“That is not true!” they said. “Tell us.” Jehu said, “Here is what he told me: ‘This is what the Lord says: I anoint you king over Israel.’” They quickly took their cloaks*>>

and spread them under him on the bare steps. Then they blew the trumpet and shouted, “Jehu is king!”>> (2 Kings 9:12-13).

Others spread branches which symbolised Jewish nationalism and victory. They were connected with prominent Jewish victories under the Maccabæans and with the Festival of Tabernacles; palm motifs were common on both Jewish coinage and synagogue decoration.

⁹ Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

“Hosanna!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Mark 11:9

Hosanna is Hebrew for save or please save. Here, Hosanna pointed to the celebration of Jesus as a political, Davidic messiah: <<*I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands*>> (2 Samuel 7:14). This is confirmed in the prophecies of Isaiah 9:1-21, Isaiah 11:1-16, and Jeremiah 23:1-8.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord is from: <<*Lord, save us! Lord, grant us success! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. From the house of the Lord we bless you*>> (Psalm 118:25-26), a prayer of blessing for the coming messianic kingdom. It translates the Greek *ho erchomenos*, which literally means ‘he that should come’, indicating that the Messiah was expected.

Later that week, having pronounced woes on the religious leaders and spoken over Jerusalem, Jesus would say: <<*For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’>> (Matthew 23:39), thus identifying himself with God’s Messiah and Saviour, who will once again come to his people, but only after a time of great judgment, when they are finally ready to receive him.*

The Triumphal Entry took place at the beginning of Passover week, which recalls the Jewish people’s liberation from Egyptian slavery; the pilgrims now anticipate the messianic liberation from Rome’s oppression. The claims of the disciples are ultimately true, although it would not be Rome that was defeated now but Satan, sin and death. All enemies of righteousness will one day see the authority of Messiah.

This is the only time in Mark where there is no evident tension between Jesus’ messianic identity, the messianic expectations of his disciples, and those of the people. Jesus tolerated this brief period of celebration in fulfilment of Zechariah’s prophecy about him, but with the certainty that nothing would obstruct the divinely ordained death of the Messiah.

¹⁰ “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

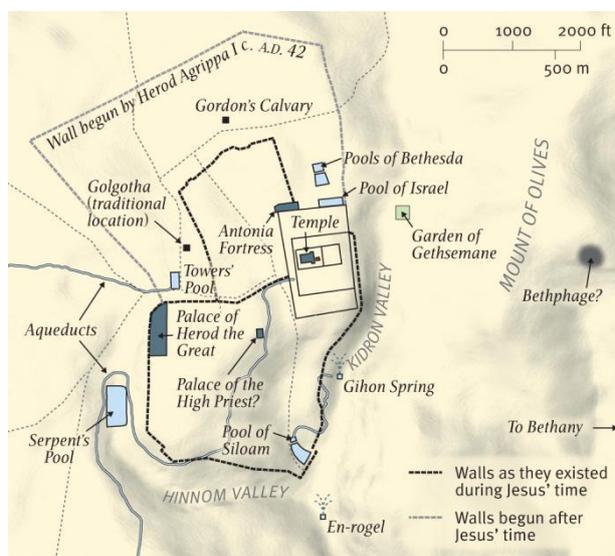
Mark 11:10

This praise was reminiscent of the praise offered by the angels as they announced the arrival of the baby Jesus to the shepherds in Bethlehem: <<“**Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests**”>> (Luke 2:14).

The coming kingdom of our father David shows that the people truly believed this was their Messiah, although it would take less than a week for them to go from proclaiming Hosanna in the highest heaven to crucify him!

The shouts of Hosanna will one day be heard once again, giving its true meaning: <<And they cried out in a loud voice: “**Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb**”>> (Revelation 7:10).

Not everyone was welcoming the arrival of their king: <<So the Pharisees said to one another, “**See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!**”>> (John 12:19). Perhaps they sensed a different outcome to God’s attention being back on the city that bears his name: <<See, I am beginning to bring disaster on the city that bears my Name, and will you indeed go unpunished? You will not go unpunished, for I am calling down a sword on all who live on the earth, declares the Lord Almighty>> (Jeremiah 25:29), and: <<Lord, listen! Lord, forgive! Lord, hear and act! For your sake, my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name>> (Daniel 9:19).



Jerusalem in Jesus' Time

¹¹ Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

Mark 11:11

Jesus looked around at everything in the temple courts, not as a pilgrim but as: <<the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty>> (Malachi 3:1b).

He looked around this centre of Jewish religious life to see if it was fulfilling its purpose of leading people to true worship of God. Jesus remained silent on this occasion despite what he saw. His silence would last less than a day: <<When you did these things and I kept silent, you thought I was exactly like you. But I now arraign you and set my accusations before you. “Consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you to pieces, with no one to rescue you: Those who sacrifice thank offerings honour me, and to the blameless I will show my salvation”>> (Psalm 50:21-23). Had Jesus cleared the temple that evening it may have been perceived as a rash gesture. Also, he was due in Bethany that evening

and he would not want to give the impression that he was fleeing the scene of the crime in the eyes of the authorities. Jesus wanted to clear the temple during the day and then stay there to be held accountable, if necessary.

During the coming week, Jesus and the Twelve stayed a short distance outside Jerusalem in Bethany, probably with their friends Lazarus, Mary and Martha: <<*Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume*>> (John 12:2-3).

III.b.ii Mark 11:12-12:44 - Jesus' judgment on religious leaders

Jesus' first actions after being hailed by the people as King, were to pass judgment on Jerusalem figuratively through the cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple, which highlighted Jesus' zeal for true worship of God, and his house: <<*His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me"*>> (John 2:17).

Jesus' teaching was bold and authoritative in confronting the religious rulers, and is both introduced (vv.20-25), and concluded (Mark 12:38-44), by the instruction of his disciples.

III.b.ii.1 Mark 11:12-26 - Jesus Curses a Fig Tree and Clears the Temple Courts

The way in which Mark organises his material in these verses, fig tree/cleansing of temple/fig tree, suggests a connection between the cleansing of the temple and the cursing of the fig tree. The passage is full of condemnation for the way God's people had turned so far away from their creator and sustainer.

¹² **The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry.**
¹³ **Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴ Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.**

Mark 11:12-14

The next day was Monday of Passion Week.

Jesus was hungry. This is similar to other statements about Jesus, which could be true only of his human nature and not of his divine nature, for he was subject to all sinless human infirmities, e.g. <<*And the child grew and became strong*>> (Luke 2:40a), <<*grew in wisdom and stature*>> (Luke 2:52a), <<*was about thirty years old*>> (Luke 3:23a), <<*tired as he was*>> (John 4:6b), <<*I am thirsty*>> (John 19:28b), and: <<*crucified*>> (1 Corinthians 2:8c).

He found nothing but leaves. Since the fruit of the fig tree begins to appear about the same time as the leaves, or a little after, the appearance of the leaves in full bloom should have indicated that fruit, in the form of green figs, was already growing. Jesus' actions here have symbolic importance, signifying the hypocrisy of

all who have the appearance that they are bearing fruit but in fact are not. This applied to the Jews in his day and the church ever since.

The statement it was not the season for figs clearly indicates that followers of Jesus are expected to produce fruit all year round and not wait for the seasons to change, as some are given to do.

This specific reference, though, is to Israel, since in the OT the fig tree often serves as a metaphor for Israel and its standing before God: <<‘I will take away their harvest, declares the Lord. There will be no grapes on the vine. There will be no figs on the tree, and their leaves will wither. What I have given them will be taken from them’>> (Jeremiah 8:13), <<When I found Israel, it was like finding grapes in the desert; when I saw your ancestors, it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig tree. But when they came to Baal Peor, they consecrated themselves to that shameful idol and became as vile as the thing they loved>> (Hosea 9:10), <<Ephraim is blighted, their root is withered, they yield no fruit. Even if they bear children, I will slay their cherished offspring>> (Hosea 9:16), and: <<It has laid waste my vines and ruined my fig trees. It has stripped off their bark and thrown it away, leaving their branches white>> (Joel 1:7).

May no one ever eat fruit from you again. Here, the cursing of the fig tree signified the judgment of God on the fruitless Jewish people: <<He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: “These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me>> (Mark 7:6), who had turned away from God into the empty ritual and legalism indicated in Hosea 9:10-17. It is a visual parable to signify Jesus’ unrequited search for the true fruit of worship, prayer and righteousness in the Jewish nation and its religious practices: <<Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth>> (John 4:23-24). In many ways it was the reverse of Jotham’s parable, where the fig tree declined kingship in order to keep its fruit: <<But the fig tree replied, ‘Should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to hold sway over the trees?’>> (Judges 9:11). Although Jesus was prepared to curse this one fig tree, he was not prepared to cut down the fig tree of Israel at that time: <<Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilise it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down’”>> (Luke 13:6-8), giving them a stay of execution.

Although God did, in part, remove Israel from his Kingdom and allowed the believing Gentiles to take their place, he has always left a route back for the Jews. Using the analogy of Israel as the cultivated olive tree and the Gentiles as the wild plant then Paul, writing primarily to Gentiles in Rome, stated: <<Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they

will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of the olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!>> (Romans 11:22-24).

His disciples heard him say it. It is important for disciples to listen and heed the woes of Christ in the same way they like to hear his blessings. Each has its place in teaching and should not be ignored.

¹⁵ On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and then began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, ¹⁶ and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. ¹⁷ And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”

Mark 11:15-17

On reaching Jerusalem. What happened next was of primary importance to Jesus and he did not get sidetracked into any other work, such as healing.

Jesus entered the temple courts. Jesus came as Lord of the temple, and he came to purify it: <<“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years>> (Malachi 3:1-4). The Deliverer of Israel and the whole of mankind had finally arrived: <<I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written: “The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob>> (Romans 11:25-26).

John’s Gospel records a similar cleansing of the temple at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (John 2:13-17). Interpreters have proposed two explanations:

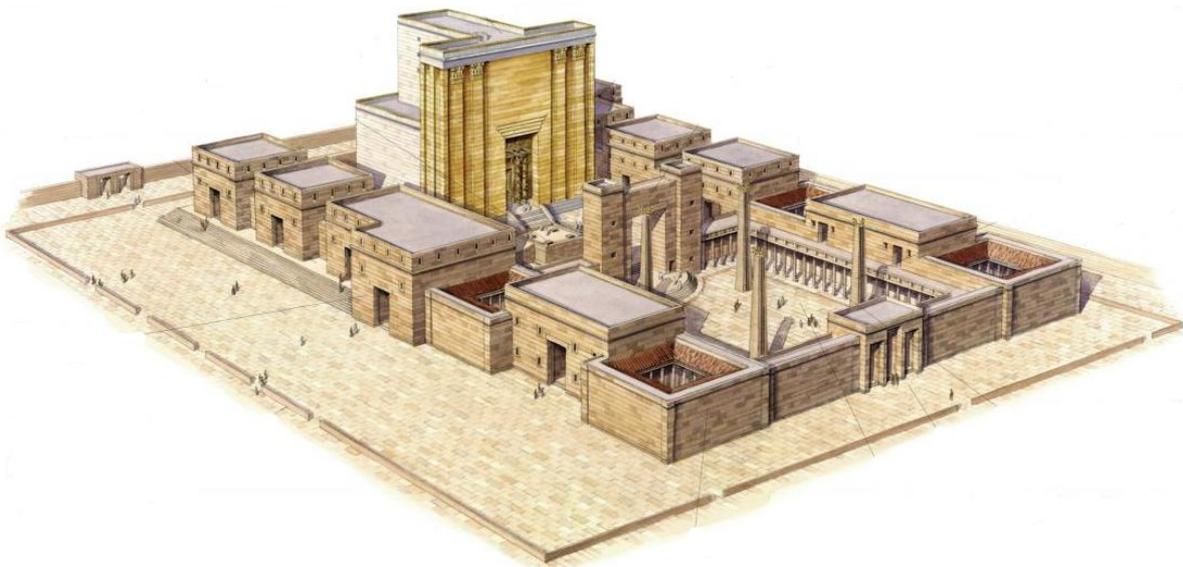
1. There was only one cleansing but John narrated the action at the beginning for thematic and theological purposes, while the Synoptic Gospels narrate the actual historical chronology.
2. There were indeed two similar but distinctly different temple cleansings.

The differences of detail seem to indicate the latter for, while the initial action is similar, Jesus’ statement in Matthew 21:13 <<“It is written,” he said to them, “‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers’”>>, and the challenge from the Jewish leaders in Matthew

21:15-16 <<But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they were indignant. “Do you hear what these children are saying?” they asked him. “Yes,” replied Jesus, “have you never read, “From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise?”>>, are entirely different from what John records.

In addition, John places the event so early in his Gospel it would be difficult to think he wanted readers to take it as anything other than an event that happened early on in Jesus’ ministry. Thus Jesus cleansed the temple at the beginning as a warning and at the end of his ministry as a statement of judgment on the leadership of Israel.

Mainly because this is recorded so early on in John’s Gospel, many commentators consider it to be a different event. However, the actions are very similar. Also, it is stated that Jesus was there for the Passover and the timing seems too coincidental for them to be different events in my opinion.



The Temple Complex: When the Gospels and the Book of Acts refer to entering the temple or teaching in the temple, it is often not a reference to Herod’s temple itself but rather to the temple complex, including a number of courts and chambers that surrounded the temple. These latter structures were the great and wonderful buildings referred to by the disciples: <<As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!”>> (Mark 13:1).

He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. On the Mount of Olives, as well as in the temple courts, tables were set up to enable pilgrims to change their respective currencies into coins for the annual temple tax of half a shekel: <<Each one who crosses over to those already counted is to give a half shekel, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs. This half shekel is an offering to the Lord. All who cross over, those twenty years old or more, are to give an offering to the Lord. The rich are not to give more than a half shekel and the poor are not to give less when you make the offering to the Lord to atone for your lives.

Receive the atonement money from the Israelites and use it for the service of the tent of meeting. It will be a memorial for the Israelites before the Lord, making atonement for your lives>> (Exodus 30:13-16), as well as to purchase pigeons, lambs, oil, salt, etc. for various sin and thanksgiving sacrifices.

This event probably occurred in the Royal Stoa, although it may have been in the Court of the Gentiles, thus the market prevented the Gentiles from coming into the only part of the complex they would be allowed to enter, hence the reference to it being a house of prayer for all nations. That Gentiles were anticipated to come to God's house was confirmed by King Solomon in his prayer during the dedication of the temple, almost a millennium earlier: **<<As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name – for they will hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm – when they come and pray toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name>>** (1 Kings 8:41-43).

The business activity turned the house of prayer into a den of robbers **<<Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord>>** (Jeremiah 7:11). Gentiles in particular were hindered by the temple commerce in the outer court. The goal of Jesus' action was to restore the temple, temporarily at least, to its primary function, in order that: **<<Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations>>** (Isaiah 56:7b).

¹⁸ The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

Mark 11:18

Paradoxically, the chief priests and teachers of the law, who were in favour of commerce in the temple, sought to destroy the Purifier: **<<Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus>>** (Mark 3:6), and their final mockery: **<<In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can't save himself! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him>>** (Mark 15:31-32), rather than to be purified themselves. Their actions were motivated by fear of Jesus' popularity; fear of losing power: social, economic and political; and fear of a public uprising, in which case the Romans would have intervened. The Jewish leaders correctly saw Jesus' act as a challenge to their authority in the most sacred space in the world.

Heard this and began looking for a way to kill him. As will be seen the following day, these leaders did not act in a way they should. They should have come immediately to challenge Jesus but did not. Instead, they started to hatch a plot to rid themselves of Jesus, rather than coming to hear why he was doing it. Although not all the leaders were without integrity: **<<Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, “Does our law**

condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?”>> (John 7:50-51).

The whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. Jesus’ teaching was diametrically opposed to that of the current religious leadership for he advocated this great reversal that was given especially during his Sermon on the Mount showing that it was the underprivileged that would inherit the Kingdom of God and not the wealthy. Also, it was: *<<A new teaching – and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him>> (Mark 1:27b).*

¹⁹ When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

Mark 11:19

As in Galilee, Jesus periodically retreated from public work. He may have stayed on Olivet, perhaps in the Garden of Gethsemane for that was where Judas would take the guards to arrest him, or perhaps he continued on the longer journey back to Bethany.

²⁰ In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots.

Mark 11:20

In the morning, which is now Tuesday. Matthew compressed the events of these two days into a single narrative and does not specify that the disciples did not see the withered fig tree until the next day. Mark gives more detailed chronological information, while Matthew treats the event topically: *<<Early in the morning, as Jesus was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, “May you never bear fruit again!” Immediately the tree withered. When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. “How did the fig tree wither so quickly?” they asked. Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer”>> (Matthew 21:18-22), which in no way detracts from the powerful imagery of the occasion.*

Withered from the roots. The fig tree had not dried up in the hot sun but had its nourishment removed from within. This is symbolic of God removing himself from the presence of his people Israel for their hard heartedness toward both him and his Son. Before the Hebrews had even entered the Promised Land the Levitical priesthood was established and confirmed when a dry piece of wood miraculously came to life: *<<The next day Moses entered the tent and saw that Aaron’s staff, which represented the tribe of Levi, had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds>> (Leviticus 17:8).* Now, through God’s curse, the process had been reversed and the priesthood was all but dead, surviving only thirty more years or so before the destruction of the temple in AD70 dealt it a final blow.

²¹ Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!”

Mark 11:21

The fig tree had withered within 24 hours, perhaps even immediately but not noted in Mark until the following day. It represented the judgment of God on Israel: *<<All the stars in the sky will be dissolved and the heavens rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shrivelled figs from the fig tree>> (Isaiah 34:4), <<It has laid waste my vines and ruined my fig trees. It has stripped off their bark and thrown it away, leaving their branches white. Mourn like a virgin in sackcloth grieving for the betrothed of her youth. Grain offerings and drink offerings are cut off from the house of the Lord. The priests are in mourning, those who minister before the Lord. The fields are ruined, the ground is dried up; the grain is destroyed, the new wine is dried up, the olive oil fails. Despair, you farmers, wail, you vine growers; grieve for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field is destroyed. The vine is dried up and the fig tree is withered; the pomegranate, the palm and the apple tree – all the trees of the field – are dried up. Surely the people’s joy is withered away>> (Joel 1:7-12), and: <<Many times I struck your gardens and vineyards, destroying them with blight and mildew. Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees, yet you have not returned to me,” declares the Lord>> (Amos 4:9). Also refer to the comments made on vv.13-14.*

²² “Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. ²³ “Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them.

Mark 11:22-23

Have faith in God. Jesus’ response must have surprised the disciples. After all, what does faith have to do with the cursing of the fig tree? His point was that they should trust God to remove whatever hindered them from bearing fruit for God.

Moving a mountain was a metaphor in Jewish literature for doing what was seemingly impossible: *<<Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain>> (Isaiah 40:4), <<I will turn all my mountains into roads, and my highways will be raised up>> (Isaiah 49:11), and: <<Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,” says the Lord, who has compassion on you>> (Isaiah 54:10). Those who believe in God can have confidence that he will accomplish even the impossible, according to his sovereign will.*

In reality, giving his disciples the abilities to cast out demons, heal the sick and raise the dead, which they do through faith alone, is the same as moving a mountain. Although Paul points out that these gifts are nothing without the love of God that underpins it all: *<<If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing>> (1 Corinthians 13:2). The love of Christ is the greatest of all miracles for it removed a mountain of guilt from each person who has subsequently come to faith in Jesus.*

²⁴ Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

Mark 11:24

Whatever you ask. God delights in giving good things to those who ask him: <<*If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!*>> (Matthew 7:11), and is capable of granting any prayer, although believers must ask with Godly motives: <<*When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures*>> (James 4:3), and according to God's will: <<*This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us*>> (1 John 5:14).

Believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. Those who trust God for the right things in the right way can have confidence in God to supply their needs, as Paul confirms: <<*And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus*>> (Philippians 4:19), <<*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose*>> (Romans 8:28), for: <<*He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*>> (Romans 8:32).

Some have misused this verse by telling people that if they pray for physical healing, or for some other specific request, and if they just have enough faith, then they can have confidence that God has already done, or will do, whatever they ask. However, Scripture is clear that a believer must always have the same perspective that Jesus had. That is, confidence in God's power but also submission to his will: <<*“Abba, Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will”*>> (Mark 14:36).

²⁵ And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”

Mark 11:25

Forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you. This is a key passage in the Christian faith that requires all believers to have a genuine forgiving nature toward those that may have hurt them in any way. Forgiving is not forgetting but it has to be genuine. Christian forgiveness requires that a person actually wishes the other person well. Once that is achieved within the heart of a believer, then God will forgive them their sins. In fact, Jesus' teaching goes beyond just forgiving others, for it calls for reconciliation, especially within the church: <<*Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift*>> (Matthew 5:23-24).

It is just as important for disciples to be ready to ask for the forgiveness of those that they may have caused harm or distress to, even if was unintentional. Followers of Jesus must also resist any temptation they may have to retaliate against anyone who hurts them.

{{The NIV does not include v.26 as it is omitted from early manuscripts. The following is taken from the NASB}}.

{{²⁶ But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.}}

III.b.ii.2 Mark 11:27-33 - The Authority of Jesus Questioned

If it did not have such serious consequences for all concerned, this would make a good comedy sketch. The religious leaders enquire by whose authority Jesus was performing miracles, clearing the temple and teaching new ways about bringing people to God. In reply, Jesus asked them a question as to whether John's baptism was from God or man. They refused to answer out of fear, so Jesus refused to debate further with them, no doubt having lost any remaining respect he might have had for the positions of authority they held.

²⁷ They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. ²⁸ “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you authority to do this?”

²⁹ Jesus replied, “I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ³⁰ John's baptism – was it from heaven, or of human origin? Tell me!”

³¹ They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn't you believe him?’ ³² But if we say, ‘Of human origin' ...” (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.)

³³ So they answered Jesus, “We don't know.”

Jesus said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

Mark 11:27-33

The chief priests were not the same as the High Priest, although they were members of the ruling council, the Sanhedrin. Many of these men would later sit in judgement on Jesus.

Normally, the chief priests and the teachers of the law and the elders would have been the men who would teach or give authority for others to undertake tasks in and around the temple area. They had significant authority over the day to day lives of the ordinary people, the ones who mainly came to Jesus. The official leaders of Israel enquired of Jesus by what authority he is doing these things.

The question related immediately to the cleansing of the temple (vv.15-19), and also to his healing and teaching in the temple courts, and throughout his ministry in Galilee as well, because Jesus was neither an official priestly nor a scribal authority, according to the official standards of his questioners. However, by their own actions, these leaders of Israel would lose their authority to lead, for God was not with them: *<<Indeed, I am against those who prophesy false dreams,” declares the Lord. “They tell them and lead my people astray with their reckless lies, yet I did not send or appoint them. They do not benefit these people in the least,” declares the Lord>>* (Jeremiah 23:32).

John’s baptism, which would mean his ministry as well, was it from heaven, i.e. directly from God or with his specific authority, or of human origin, i.e. did it come from John’s own mind?

To avoid the dilemma posed by the question, Jesus’ opponents said we don’t know, because they feared the consequences of speaking against John the Baptist, whose divinely authorised ministry was also carried out apart from any official Jewish authority. Their confession of ignorance, however, demonstrated that they had no basis on which to assess Jesus’ ministry. If they did not know whether John the Baptist was from God, they could not know whether Jesus was either. Faced with such hostility and inept leadership, Jesus refused to answer his opponents’ question, neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things, exposing their ignorance and lack of sincerity.

Jesus did not press home his point, for he could have made these men look really foolish simply through the expression of his own wisdom. He may have considered reminding them of the Scripture: *<<This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways>>* (Haggai 1:7), or: *<<The day of the Lord is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head>>* (Obadiah 15), both of which would seem appropriate but since they did not believe John or Jesus, they would not go back and heed the prophets of old, even if they did read them every Sabbath; in fact: *<<The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognise Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath>>* (Acts 13:27). All disciples can learn from this, not by applying their own wisdom, but through their good works: *<<For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people>>* (1 Peter 2:15). Jesus thus came away from this confrontation with honour, leaving them with no other option than to conclude that, like John, Jesus’ authority was indeed divine.