

## THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

### Lesson 70, Chapter 21 Continued

As we opened Matthew chapter 21 last week we read about what Christianity calls the Triumphal Entry. In this short but revealing action in Yeshua's life and mission, He enters Jerusalem riding upon a donkey, accompanied with the donkey's foal. This is intentionally done in order to visibly fulfill the messianic prophecy of Zechariah 9:9.

In His approach up the road that leads across the Mount of Olives to the Eastern Gate of Jerusalem, Christ encounters two distinct and separate groups of people: those inside the walls of Jerusalem, and those lining the roads on the outside. Outside are mostly the people who have been following Him as He trekked from the Galilee to the Holy City; thus a good deal, if not the majority, of that group consists of Galileans. Inside the city are the residents of Jerusalem; meaning they are Judeans (Judea being the Roman name for the province in which Jerusalem is located). Although these are all Hebrews, Galileans and Judeans are somewhat like oil and water; they don't mix very well. And thus we see two entirely different reactions to Jesus's dramatic arrival for the Passover festival, even declaring Himself to be king. None of the people view Him as their Messiah; rather to the majority He is the one who embodies the spirit of Solomon... the Son of David... but yet is greater than Solomon.

The Galileans and the other Jews in the crowd outside the gates adore Christ and praise Him because of His miracle healing, His compassion, and His Wisdom teachings. They lay their outer garments (their cloaks that serve as both jackets and blankets) on the road for Him to ride over. This act is a traditional symbolic display of allegiance. The Judeans inside the city are wary of Yeshua and consider Him as an annoyance if not a threat. The Galileans are proud of

Yeshua because He, too, is a Galilean... one of them. The Judeans, considering themselves to be the sophisticated and pious Jews, look down on Him as an outsider, as they do all Galileans as little more than crude country bumpkins that they are obligated to tolerate 3 times a year for the God-ordained pilgrimage festivals to the Temple.

Let's continue now as the next thing we read about Jesus doing is going to the Temple and creating a ruckus. Open your Bibles to Matthew 21 and we'll start reading at verse 10.

### RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 21:10 - 17

Mark has the same story but of course, because Matthew's intended audience is Jews while Mark's is gentiles, the wording and tone in Mark is somewhat different.

**CJB Mark 11:15-18 <sup>15</sup> On reaching Yerushalayim, he entered the Temple courts and began driving out those who were carrying on business there, both the merchants and their customers. He also knocked over the desks of the money-changers, upset the benches of the pigeon-dealers, <sup>16</sup> and refused to let anyone carry merchandise through the Temple courts. <sup>17</sup> Then, as he taught them, he said, "Isn't it written in the Tanakh, My house will be called a house of prayer for all the Goyim But you have made it into a den of robbers! <sup>18</sup> The head cohanim and the Torah-teachers heard what he said and tried to find a way to do away with him; they were afraid of him, because the crowds were utterly taken by his teaching.**

There is another noticeable difference between Matthew's and Mark's Gospel accounts. In Matthew's, Jesus rides into the city and immediately goes to the Temple to confront the business operators there. In Mark, after entering the city Christ goes to the Temple, looks around, but then goes to Bethany to spend the night. The next day He starts to walk back towards Jerusalem, curses a fig tree along the way, and only afterward returns to the Temple to express His extreme displeasure with what's going on there. Clearly whomever the two Gospel writers interviewed to get their information had different memories about the goings-on the first couple of days Yeshua was in Jerusalem. We need to not be terribly concerned about event sequence because it really plays no role in the meaning or actions Yeshua took. These Gospels were written more than 3 decades after the fact, so one is pretty apt to get such details from people that remember things

a bit differently.

Notice in verse 11 that the people from the Galilee speak of Yeshua as a prophet. It's important to remember that by the early part of the 1st century it was believed that divine prophecy had pretty well come to a close. The generally held belief was that Malachi was probably the last of the class of people called Prophets in their holy book; chosen men that brought God's heaven-sourced prophecies to earth. So now the term prophet carried a different meaning... 2 different meanings in fact. The first kind were seers of the future (not so much in a divine sense... rather more like modern age fortune-tellers ), and the second kind were respected teachers and interpreters of God's written Word. God's written Word for Jesus and all other Jews was the **Tanakh**... what is most widely known to us as the Old Testament. Yet at the same time, because His reputation preceded Him, Yeshua was considered as more than a run-of-the-mill Torah interpreter and teacher... He was quite special. In fact, there is no doubt that at least some of the crowds hoped that Christ was the "prophet like me" that Moses said would someday appear.

As Yeshua enters the Temple (it would have been into the outer courts) He encounters the usual dizzying array of merchants and business people along with their customers. He goes into a rage and begins to upset their tables and knock over benches to display what we must take as genuine personal anger, but also as intentional symbolism of God's divine wrath that is coming. But what, exactly, was He furious about? The reality was that the money changers and the business people provided a valuable and legitimate service. It revolved around the sacrificial system that required animals for the burnt offerings. People coming even from the Galilee (which was relatively close by) didn't usually bring their animals with them to Jerusalem. Especially those from farther away could not bring their best animals with them from a practical aspect. The odds that the animals would even survive the trip weren't great, and the hassle of transporting them wasn't worth it. So the scores of thousands of Jewish pilgrims purchased their sacrificial animals from Temple-approved suppliers rather than bringing them with them.

Therefore Yeshua's issue was not with the Temple itself as a divinely ordained institution, but rather it has to do with the corruption of the men who ran it. Instead of serving God's people in good faith, they used it as a for-profit enterprise. In fact, very probably the reason Yeshua made a point to do what He did in knocking things over was to visibly fulfill the prophecy of the Psalms of

Solomon, Psalm 17 verse 30... or perhaps of Zechariah 14:21. Do not look in your Bibles in the Book of Psalms to find this. The Psalms of Solomon are not contained in our Bibles. They were created in the 1st or 2nd centuries B.C. and were widely known and used in Yeshua's era. There we read: "And he will purge Jerusalem and make it holy as it was even from the beginning." Zechariah contains something similar:

<sup>CJB</sup> **Zechariah 14:21** Yes, every cooking pot in Yerushalayim and Y'hudah will be consecrated to ADONAI-Tzva'ot. Everyone who offers sacrifices will come, take them and use them to stew the meat. When that day comes, there will no longer be merchants in the house of ADONAI-Tzva'ot.

It is interesting that in this verse from Zechariah the Hebrew word that is most accurately translated as "merchant" is literally "Canaanite". Canaanite had become a derogatory term used to mean corrupt people, and merchants as a class of people were often put in league with tax collectors and so were seen as dishonest.

It is terribly important that we recognize that nearly everything we read about Jesus doing as He enters Jerusalem, and right on through the time of His death and resurrection, were prophesied centuries earlier. He orchestrated the fulfillment of many of them, just as He had in doing His amazing miracles of healing, so that He could provide firm evidence that He was the One the ancient prophets were speaking about. For those Jews whose hearts and eyes were open, they would in time accept His acted-out fulfillments as proof that He indeed was Israel's divine Messiah. But the vast bulk of the Jews were blind to it; they had been led astray and taught wrongly (for generations) by the Jewish religious leadership, and so in their darkened eyes He didn't fulfill the very different expectations of the Messiah that their Synagogue and Temple leaders had created as Tradition and insisted upon.

The thought is also often put forward that Jesus's actions were intended to "cleanse the Temple".... to make it ritually pure.... I see no evidence of that. Christ didn't do what He did to repair or restore anything; what He did was as a personal protest and as a divine symbol.... and then He moved on. Jesus goes on to justify His actions (that no doubt riled pretty much everyone that witnessed them) by saying "It is written that My house will be called a house of prayer". When He says "it is written" He of course is meaning written in the *Tanakh*.

**CJB Isaiah 56:7 *I will bring them to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples.***"

Notice how Matthew omits the "for all peoples" part of the prophecy, but Mark includes it. It is but another case example of Matthew writing his Gospel for a Jewish audience and Mark for a gentile audience. Matthew had little interest in including the thought of gentiles being welcomed into the Temple of Jerusalem; but of course Mark wanted to highlight it. Further, Yeshua takes a short quote from Jeremiah 7 when He calls the robust commerce going on in the Temple courts "a den of robbers".

Verse 14 changes course. He's still in the Temple; however Yeshua resumes His miracle healing ministry, if only briefly. Likely He has moved to a different Temple court... probably in the Court of the Gentiles. His actions here are also provocative, but in another way. This is the one and only time we'll hear of Him healing illnesses in Jerusalem. That He performs these miracles within the Temple grounds would have brought the Sadducees and Pharisees much concern. This action also needs to alert us to Him continuing to display His "spirit of Solomon" attribute. We can be nearly certain that He was in the Court of the Gentiles at this point because we're told that the blind and the lame came up to Him. The blind and the lame were excluded from the Temple grounds. But since the Court of the Gentiles was reserved for foreigners and non-God Worshippers, thus making the area ritually unclean, then these Jewish blind and crippled were also permitted to go there.

**CJB Leviticus 21:17-21 <sup>17</sup> "Tell Aharon, 'None of your descendants who has a defect may approach to offer the bread of his God. <sup>18</sup> No one with a defect may approach- no one blind, lame, with a mutilated face or a limb too long, <sup>19</sup> a broken foot or a broken arm, <sup>20</sup> a hunched back, stunted growth, a cataract in his eye, festering or running sores, or damaged testicles - <sup>21</sup> no one descended from Aharon the cohen who has such a defect may approach to present the offerings for ADONAI made by fire; he has a defect and is not to approach to offer the bread of his God.**

Notice how this Scripture passage was no doubt used as the basis to prohibit the blind and the lame from entering the holy precincts of the Temple. However, also notice that this command was ONLY aimed at the priesthood (the descendants of

Aaron). Like so much else within the 1<sup>st</sup> century Hebrew faith, a doctrine had been taken out of its intended biblical context and wrongly applied. It was a manmade Tradition that the blind and lame Jewish laymen were excluded from the Temple grounds; it was not an ordinance of God. In fact, this cruel Tradition is quoted in the Dead Sea Scrolls as existing at this time and even extended to the lame and blind being excluded from Jewish religious congregations in general (and so almost certainly from Synagogues) and from banquets (1QSa 2:5 -22). This helps us to understand how terrible and unjust life was for the crippled and the blind and thus why Jesus was always moved to heal them.

I also want to comment on a regular claim from Christian Bible commentators that Jesus going to the Court of the Gentiles demonstrates that He was in process of removing God's blessing from the Jews and transferring it to the gentile Church. This, of course, is another bogus claim that ignores what proceeded to occur there. The idea that gentiles came to Jerusalem at Passover so Jesus could heal them approaches the absurd. The reason Yeshua went to exactly where He did in the Temple area was specifically to heal the blind and lame Jews who could appear nowhere else than the Court of the Gentiles.

The reaction to all this commotion and of Yeshua going against Tradition and even becoming involved in healing at the Temple (an area jealously guarded and controlled by the High Priest) was predictable. Verse 15 says: "But when the High Priest and the Scribes saw the wonderful things he was doing..." The point here is that there were two spheres of Jewish religious authority present that actually were rivals: the Temple and the Synagogue. One had little to no control over the other... they were fully separate institutions. Here however they joined forces as the leadership of both spheres were upset with Christ. Then we read that the children were also shouting "hosanna" at Yeshua. This really isn't surprising since Jewish children began learning to memorize and recite the Hallel (from which comes the term hosanna) at a very early age. As I have shown you, children had a limited role around adults, and it almost always involved labor... such as working in the field. Today we can be thrilled about young children sitting in a Believer's congregation meeting and joining in with the adults in praise and worship and hearing God's Word and even in asking questions. It wasn't quite like this in the 1<sup>st</sup> century in Jewish society. Adult women were excluded from much religious activity, and children were even lower on the religious totem pole. That is, children (in the view of these grumbling religious authorities) shouldn't have been involved or certainly not shouting anything at all. So these authorities told Yeshua exactly how they felt about it. In response, Yeshua paraphrases

Scripture that sort of conflates 2 verses.

<sup>CJB</sup> **Psalm 8:2-3** <sup>2</sup> *ADONAI! Our Lord! How glorious is your name throughout the earth! The fame of your majesty spreads even above the heavens!* <sup>3</sup> *From the mouths of babies and infants at the breast you established strength because of your foes, in order that you might silence the enemy and the avenger.*

Understand: it was the Jewish custom that when quoting a short Scripture passage that it was the way that one referred to the entire passage. Today if we want to refer to a passage in a Bible book we'll give a chapter and verse number (or range of numbers). No such protocol existed at that time so the only way to communicate what you intended was to say a brief part of a passage and then expect the other party to know the remainder of it. Point being, the Priest and Scribes full well knew the part that Jesus didn't say. The part that says who this passage was meant for: "the enemy and the avenger". They got it that Christ meant them. He wasn't there to make friends.

This ends this part of the Jerusalem Temple scene and Christ now heads for the Mount of Olives and the town of Bethany that is about a 2 mile walk. Let's read some more of Matthew 21.

### **RE-READ MATTHEW 21:18 - 27**

This is the famous story of Yeshua cursing the fig tree. Matthew omits saying that it was not the season for figs, something that Mark includes. Why? Perhaps because Jews in the Holy Land know when it's fig season in Israel, but gentiles may not.

As a few Bible commentators have noted, this story tends to upset some Christians because Jesus is cursing a fig tree that doesn't seem to have done any wrong nor is it an aberration of some sort. Let's set the scene. He's on the road back to Jerusalem from Bethany; this means He's standing on the Mount the Olives. Next to the road He spots a fig tree that has no fruit; only leaves. Considering this would have been the late March/early April timeframe, it wasn't time for figs to appear and then ripen (just as Mark reports) because figs are a summer and a fall season fruit. Mysteriously Christ walks up to the tree, seems angry that there's no figs on it, so He curses it and immediately it withers and dies.

The disciples are stunned because they, like most Believers in all eras, can't understand why Jesus would do this seemingly illogical thing... unless He was just in a bad mood. So, they ask Him why the fig tree died. Surprisingly, He doesn't really answer their question. Rather He tells them HOW they can have the ability to do the same thing! He says if they will trust and not doubt then they can not only decimate a fig tree with but a word, but even throw the mountain into the sea. We'll get to the final part of His response shortly.

First: I am going to say something that I hope has you all scurrying to your New Testaments to fact-check me. Nowhere in the Gospels does Christ directly say to trust in Him. He certainly says to mimic Him, even to follow Him. But Him instructing people to trust in Him simply doesn't occur in the Gospel accounts. Rather all direct encouragement to trust someone points to Yeshua's heavenly Father (although since Yeshua is divine a certain trust in Him can also be derived).

Second: Christ does NOT say that with enough trust that the disciples can throw **A** mountain into the sea; He says **THIS** mountain. What mountain were they standing on? The Mount of Olives.

Third: It is commonly said in Bible commentaries that the fig tree must be symbolic of something; that is, Yeshua wasn't in a bad mood and just needed to curse something to let out His emotions. The symbol that is usually suggested is that the fig tree represents Israel; I have my doubts in this instance. Israel is nearly always symbolized by the olive tree. And if not an olive tree, Israel's common symbol is a vineyard. There do seem to be a couple of odd instances in which the fig is mentioned alongside Israel.

Fourth: It is also common among Bible commentaries (very good ones I might add) to equate Israel with Jerusalem; that is, they are very nearly synonyms and usually mean the same thing when spoken of in the Bible (especially prophetically). I disagree. Jerusalem is Israel's national and spiritual capital. It represents both governmental and religious leadership. Jerusalem is, quite simply, the center of the world. Israel as a whole, is not. So now let's put this together.

Yeshua is standing on the Mount of Olives that received its name for a good reason: it was positively crammed with olive trees. A fig tree was an outlier. It's not that it didn't belong, it's only that its character was quite different from that of



olive trees. So it's the context and setting of the story that leads us to its meaning.

Yeshua had just received the coldest of welcomes inside the city gates of Jerusalem by the city's residents. The religious leadership of both the Temple and the Synagogue were now gunning for Him and openly displayed their disdain against Him. The Romans were deeply suspicious of Him. He has just also expressed His own disdain for what had become "The Temple, Inc". It was no longer a sanctified place for worship; it had become a shopping mall for the benefit of the Priesthood's bank accounts. The point is this: the fig tree was symbolic not of Israel in general, but of Jerusalem in particular. It would be Jerusalem's residents, religious leadership, and government that would condemn the innocent Yeshua to die a horrible death on a Roman death stake... not Israel.

Just as His attack on the Temple merchants and money changers was symbolic of God's anger and wrath on the corruption done by the Priesthood to this most holy place, so was Yeshua's attack on a barren fig tree symbolic of a spiritually fruitless Jerusalem. The curse was that it wither and die. And in but 40 years, Jerusalem and the Temple would also wither and die; destroyed by an angry and vengeful Roman Emperor. So the curse of the fig tree was symbolic but it was also a veiled prophecy of God's judgment on the city, its residents and the national and spiritual leadership.

On the other hand, we do read in the Prophets of judgment against Israel as a whole and against Jerusalem specifically and separately. And each are symbolized differently.

CJB **Joel 1:1-7** <sup>1</sup> *The word of ADONAI that came to Yo'el the son of P'tu'el:* <sup>2</sup> *"Hear this, you leaders! Listen, all who live in the land! Has anything like this ever happened in your days, or in your ancestors' days?"* <sup>3</sup> *Tell your children about it, and have them tell it to theirs, and have them tell the next generation.* <sup>4</sup> *What the cutter-worms left, the locusts ate; what the locusts left, the grasshoppers ate; what the grasshoppers left, the shearer-worms ate.* <sup>5</sup> *Wake up, drunkards, and weep! wail, all you who drink wine, because the juice of the grape will be withheld from your mouth.* <sup>6</sup> *For a mighty and numberless nation has invaded my land. His teeth are lion's teeth; his fangs are those of a lioness.* <sup>7</sup> *He has reduced my vines to waste, my fig trees to splinters - he plucked them bare, stripped their bark and left their branches white."*

Notice how the vines (vines are vineyards) and the fig trees are both punished. Notice that verse 2 separates the leadership from everyone else, even though both groups will be decimated ("Hear this you leaders! Listen ALL who live in the land"). Vines represent Israel at large, figs the leadership of Israel (that reside in Jerusalem). So I think the connections I'm suggesting are justifiable and therefore correct.

As for throwing "this mountain" (the Mount of Olives) into the sea by means of sufficient trust. I'm not sure I can provide a really good answer for this. Yet I think the vein in which we have to consider this is as an End Times prophetic one.

Let's read Zechariah (who next to Isaiah is clearly Jesus's go-to prophet) and I think this might help us to assemble the pieces of this story.

### **READ ZECHARIAH 14:1 - 11**

So the Mount of Olives is prophesied to suffer a destructive calamity and be split apart by a giant earthquake such that fresh water will well up from deep underground in a huge volume, and flow through the now divided mountain in 2 directions: each direction ending up at a sea. The formerly decimated Jerusalem and its violated residents (all at the judgment of God) will be rebuilt and restored...why?...because Zechariah says the divine curse upon it will finally be lifted. I think we can connect Yeshua cursing the symbol of Jerusalem, the fig tree, with the curse that first destroys Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives, but then will be lifted in the End Times.

Verse 22 concludes this story of the cursed fig tree with: "In other words, you will receive everything you ask for in prayer, no matter what it is, provided you have trust". Wow. That's quite the promise. How are we to take this? Some branches of evangelical Christianity embrace this promise by a doctrine that some call "name it and claim it". That is, quite literally, if you truly trust God, and you ask for something in prayer, it will be granted you no matter what it might be. This notion is also the basis for the Prosperity Doctrine that is all the rage in some corners of Western Christianity. It follows then, that Jesus has obligated His Father to do this. Fellow Believers, we know from personal experience that this is a pretty suspect meaning because not even when Yeshua in His darkest hour asked His Father to take this cup of suffering from Him (as He was but hours from the cross), it didn't happen. Rather true trust in the Father makes our prayers to include the notion that despite our want or need, it is the Father's will that we

should want even more.

<sup>CJB</sup> **Matthew 26:39** <sup>39</sup> ***Going on a little farther, he fell on his face, praying, "My Father, if possible, let this cup pass from me! Yet- not what I want, but what you want!"***

While Yeshua didn't include that same qualifier in what He told His disciples in the fig tree incident, in His mind it must have gone without saying. And that is how we must understand it and it is how we must always approach God; your will, Father, and not mine in no matter what the situation.

Verse 23 has Jesus going back to the Temple. This time He's more subdued and instead of attacking He's teaching. This very likely means He's in Solomon's Portico that is the traditional place in the Temple area where the Jewish religious teachers gathered with their students. Therefore, some Temple and Synagogue authorities would naturally be there; and this time was no exception. So up they march to Yeshua and ask Him by what authority He teaches. Let me give you an illustration that, although imperfect, is close enough to get the idea. Let's say that you are on a college campus and someone walks into the library and begins to instruct the students in English Literature. It would be expected that one of the college professors or perhaps an administrator might come up and ask by whose authority this person is teaching. This would mean two things: what are your credentials and who gave you permission? Thus if you don't have the credentials, the second point is moot. Same thing with Jesus.

In modern English we might say that the religious authorities are asking for Yeshua's credentials to teach on matters of God; something that they consider themselves to be the exclusive experts. Mark's and Luke's Gospels are so nearly identical to Matthew's in this story that they must all have taken their cue from the same source; so there's no need to read all of them. As is so typical for Jesus He answers their question with a question of His own. He invokes the baptism of John the Baptist and challenges the religious leaders to tell Him whether John's baptism authority was from God or from other humans. In other words, Yeshua says in effect before I give you My credentials, let's talk about Yochanan the Immerser's credentials.

See; essentially Yeshua is saying that He got His credentials to teach by means of being baptized by John the Baptist. Another way to say it is that Jesus says He was ordained by John. So since everyone seems to be acutely aware of John

baptizing Yeshua, then the real question that demands an answer is, were John's credentials up to snuff so that when he baptized Jesus it carried weight? In the college education world the term is accreditation. A non-accredited school can confer any kind of a degree on anyone they want, but it carries no weight. Outside that school's grounds, it's a rather meaningless piece of paper. The question the religious leaders must answer, then, is if John was accredited or not; and if He was, was it by the accreditation of Heaven, or was it by a committee of men?

The religious leaders know they've been had because there's really only 2 ways they can answer it. If they say John's accreditation is from Heaven, then so is Yeshua's. And if Yeshua has Heaven's validation, then they are forced into believing what He teaches or be accused of refusing to submit to the Word of God. On the other hand, if they say that John's was essentially accreditation by a non-accredited human committee, the people will be roused to anger because they so revere John as a true Prophet. And, Jerusalem was always on edge during these highly emotional feast days and it didn't take much to spark a riot (for which the religious leadership might be blamed). So they took the easy way out. They said that they don't know the answer to Christ's question. Christ said fine: then I won't tell you the source of My accreditation.

I think we must notice that despite the obvious tension that we have read about in earlier chapters between John the Baptist and Yeshua, and between the Baptist's disciples and Christ's, yet blood is thicker than water. These 2 men were, after all, cousins. Yet what matters more, no doubt, is that Yeshua recognizes the pivotal role of Elijah played by John in acting out a prophetic fulfillment. This divine office John held was not dependent upon him being a perfect man, nor in having some deep insight into all that Yeshua was and stood for. In fact, the New Testament evidence is that John really didn't fully understand the scope of Yeshua's ministry and even disagreed with Him on some theological points. Rather John answered his call from God; a call that would cost him his life. John said "yes" to God and that perhaps sums up what the Lord seeks from all workers for Him; a person who trusts Him and responds with "yes" when the Lord presents an opportunity to obey and serve.

We'll continue with chapter 21 next time as we encounter yet another Parable.

