

Rediscovering Jesus in the Jewish Gospels

Three Sons of Israel's Vineyard

Matthew 21:23-46 Lesson 40

All the "Passion Week" events of Jesus, beginning with His triumphant entry into Jerusalem through completing His last Passover Seder/Supper, are listed as Step #51 and #52 in *Wilmington's Guide to The Bible*. This chapter details the pivotal moment at which the chief cornerstone of God's plan - the presentation of the Messiah, becomes the stumbling stone to the "builders" of Israel. Jesus portrayed these leaders as evil vineyard managers set on stealing the vineyard from the heir apparent. For three years, Jesus had proclaimed that the Kingdom is "at hand" and was being offered to Israel's leaders. He was born in Bethlehem as prophesied by the Jewish prophet Micah (Micah 5:2:1; Matthew 2:1). His genealogy proves that He was a direct descendant of King David (Matthew 1:1-17). Two days before this event, the multitudes had proclaimed Jesus as the Anointed One/ מָשִׁיחַ = Messiah, Son of David. His divine powers were verified by hundreds of miracles over three and a half years as recorded in Matthew chapter 4 – 21 and in the Books of Mark, Luke, and John. He had been officially rejected (Matthew 12:23-32), by the representatives of the most politically corrupt Temple Priest in Jewish history - Caiphas. Jesus was only hours from being arrested and turned over to the Romans who would crucify Him. It is recorded that Jesus wept at Israel's historically predicted missed opportunity "because they knew not the time of thy visitation" (Matthew 23:37-39; Luke 19:41-4). King David prophesied the manner of his royal descendant's arrival. It was not a coincidence.

"This gate of the LORD, into which the righteous(צְדִיק - tszadek) shall enter. **I will praise thee: for thou hast heard me, and art become my salvation (יְשׁוּעָה – yeshua).** The stone *which* the builders refused is become the **head (ראש – rashe) stone** of the corner. This is the LORD'S doing; it *is* marvellous in our eyes. This *is* the day *which* the LORD hath made; we will **rejoice and be glad** in it (**שָׂמַח – hag samaech** is the Hebrew greeting for Happy holy day). Save now, I beseech thee, O LORD: O LORD, I beseech thee, send now prosperity. Blessed *be* he that cometh in the name of the LORD"
(Psalm 118:20-26)

יְשׁוּעָה – **yeshua** = Jesus, the צְדִיק - **tszadek** = **righteous one** had ridden through the gate on the predicted date. The **chief stone ראש – rashe** was about to be set aside by Israel's builders. Daniel predicted this prince would be "cut off" die prematurely and live again.

Psalm 118:17 foretold of His resurrection "I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the LORD."

He was referring to the predicted timeline of Daniel 9:245-27, which said the Messiah would appear and be "cut off" 483 years after the decree of the Persian King Cyrus in 445 BC. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that day in 32 AD. (see notes on the timeline from lesson 39). Then Jesus prophesied Jerusalem's **impending** destruction, which occurred in 70 AD (Luke 21; Matthew 24 1-3). Daniel had also foretold that the Messiah would appear and die before the destruction of the Temple. No other person in Israel proclaimed himself Messiah during the first century.

"Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary" (Daniel 9:26).

The authority of Jesus was questioned by the leaders of the Sanhedrin – ruling elders (Matthew chapter 21:1-22).

- **High Priest - Joseph Caiphas** served from 18 to 37 AD was the 4th High Priest appointed by the Roman procurator/governor, Valerius Gratus who preceded Pilate.

Caiaphas was of the **Sadducee sect of Judaism** and did not believe in miracles or resurrection. It must have been a shock to him when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead within 2 miles of the Temple. This event challenged Caiphas's belief system so much that he proposed killing Lazarus. (John 12:9-11). "Much people of the Jews

therefore knew that he was there: and they came not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might see Lazarus also, whom he had raised from the dead. But the chief priests consulted that they might put Lazarus also to death. Because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away, (from the teachings of the Priestly sect of the Sadducees) and believed on Jesus." They were losing influence. To them this was political.

* In 1990, a rock-hewn burial cave containing a beautifully decorated ossuary (limestone bone boxes) box inscribed with the name Caiaphas. Inside were the bones of a man who had died around the age of 60. These are believed to be the remains of Caiaphas, the very high priest who sent Jesus to the Romans for execution.

- **Sanhedrin** –was the supreme council of the Jews who met within Jerusalem's temple in a place known as the chamber of hewn stones. The Sanhedrin was like the U.S. Supreme court or the modern Israeli "Rabbinat" in that they were the final authority on decisions that affected the religious and political life of all Jews. In New Testament times, the Sanhedrin was composed of seventy-one members consisting of the High Priest *Kohane Gadol*, plus a vice council, "chief priests, the "elders of the people" including scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 26:3,59).

This study will focus on Jesus's response to the questioning of His authority. He used two parables to point a guilty finger at Israel's religious leaders. Previously indirect confrontations and accusations from the ruling powers in Jerusalem would now become open and intense. Jesus had just walked into the Temple on Monday and cleared the Temple of unethical money changers (Matthew 21:12,13). He asserted that they perverted "My House" intended to be a "house of prayer" into a "den of thieves." This alerted the Temple guard detachment who would have rushed to the scene along with key members of the Sanhedrin. Before He could be arrested, He was thronged by those bringing blind and lame to Him and He healed them (21:14). This was undeniable evidence right in front of a grand jury of Jewish elders in the Temple compound. The praises of "Hosanna to the Son of David" on Palm Sunday outside the gate now reverberated within the Temple proper (21:15). This was not the time to arrest Him lest they spark an uprising (21:46) because "the people viewed Jesus as a "prophet."

Authority Challenged

"The Chief Priests and elders of the people" (21:24) established that they were the official authorities of the Temple Mount. Jesus had just touched the "3rd rail," affecting the shekels from sales that benefited the Temple. This was huge. As the old saying goes "follow the money." In an article by Susan Sorek, published by the University of Wales, entitled *Render unto Caesar? Pilate's Acquisition of Temple Funds*¹, great detail is given to the elaborate monetary system of the Temple. Pilate was accused of mishandling of funds from the Temple treasury. Sorek writes "In one instance, (that is, with the aqueduct that serviced Jerusalem and the Temple) Pilate decided how the Temple funds should be spent. In all likelihood, he also wanted his name associated with the spending of that money." Josephus the Jewish historian for Rome never actually accuses Pilate of *stealing* the money but of *spending* it on a building project in a rather high-handed fashion. Sorek concludes "In these things, I propose that he was seen to be *usurping God's role as benefactor.*" He apparently in Gentile Roman fashion wanted his name on a project funded by money actually given to God. Pilate's name on a project funded by money that was designated to God riled the Jewish leadership. In some ways, The Temple system functioned not only as a religious institutional treasury, but in a much broader sense it served as Jerusalem's Central Bank. There is evidence that even wealthy Jerusalemites were allowed to use the temple treasury for safe keeping of their wealth with no "usury" or interest being charged. All that to say, if the Elders of Israel questioned Pilate's authority, they certainly had no qualms about questioning Jesus' interference in the financial stream flowing into

Temple coffers. They could not defend the price gouging of required Temple sacrifices “doves” nor the exorbitant fees of the money changers. Neither did Jesus have to defend his putting a stop to the thievery. Instead, he in true Jewish form responded to their question with a question, thus changing the focus from the peripheral monetary issue to that of spiritual authority. That was the real issue. Did the authority of the elders of the Sanhedrin come from God or the Roman government? In their case, the Temple finances being used for municipal projects made for strange bedfellows with Roman politics. Money, politics, and religion is always a recipe for corruption.

Recently archaeological evidence in Jerusalem has been uncovered verifying records of the extreme wealth of the Temple Priesthood. ⁱⁱ “The luxurious homes were richly decorated with beautiful mosaics, ritual baths (mikvahs), water cisterns, and frescos. Jerusalem’s Wohl Museum which just reopened, preserves the remnants of six residences, each dwelling arranged around central courtyards and comprising two to three levels each, the most elaborate one possibly belonging to Caiaphas.”



Jesus challenged them to answer before they would get an answer. (21:24) Remember, the multitudes that thronged Him were multiplied due to His overturning the tables of filthy lucre. Then the crowd swelled with news of the healing of the blind and lame. It is the beginning of Passover week. Years later Cestius was commissioned by Nero to take a census of lambs slain in Jerusalem during Passover week. It was over 250,000 lambs. If one lamb fed 8, then Jerusalem’s Passover population could have reached two million. Their challenge to His authority was theater on a grand scale. The most powerful were challenging the One with miraculous powers and mass popularity. The atmosphere was tense. It seems they had Jesus at game, set, match. But it was the other way around. The burden of proof was on them. One could have heard a pin drop. All eyes were on Jesus.

Jesus asked them whether His forerunner John the baptizer acted on his own or was he commissioned from Heaven. John had proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, “The Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world.” Many of Jesus’ followers were former followers of John, specifically Andrew, who became an Apostle of Jesus (John 1:41; 3:22). Everyone revered John. Jesus said of him, “For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist” (Luke 7:28).

Notice the religious political chess mastering at its finest in verses 25 and 26. “If we say...” but on the other hand, “If we say...” so, they gave a non-answer, “We cannot tell.” It sounds like the non-answers “I don’t recall,” given by individuals who are summoned to a hearing before the US Congress. The deal was that He would answer their question if they answered His first. They would not recognize nor renounce John’s spiritual authority while at the same time they questioned Jesus’ authority.

What do rabbis do when surrounded with a multitude of followers in the Temple? They give a *midrash*, (מדרש) defined as an interpretive act, seeking the answers to religious questions in the Bible, the root d-r-sh [דרש] is used to mean inquiring into any matter, including to seek out God’s word. A Midrash responds to contemporary problems and crafts new stories, making connections with the unchanging biblical text.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Midrash #1 A Parable of Two Sons (21:28-32)

Jesus grew up in Nazareth where archaeologists have found a winepress carved into the limestone bedrock. Further up the slope, they have also identified the foundation of a watchtower. Both date back to the first century opening up the possibility that Jesus drew the vineyard reference from his childhood memories and the horticulture of the entire region. Naboth’s vineyard was just across the Valley of Jezreel from Nazareth. Today there are world-renowned vineyards in Carmel in that same region. The vineyard was a common metaphor for Jewish teachers to connect with their followers.

The vineyard owner had two sons (21:28). He asked the first one to work in the vineyard today. The son refused but later repented – changed his mind and went to work. The father asked the second son who readily agreed but never went to work.

Leading question #1 Which one did the father’s will? The religious elders answered wisely, the first one.

Scathing rebuke. “Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.” They did what the word of God commanded, and repented and believed the message of John about who Jesus was. Therefore those sinners were like the disobedient son. They disobeyed God’s word but later repented.

Jesus said the father who is the authority will reward the son who repents and obeys. He will not reward the one who only gives lip service but never obeys. The Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes did not believe John’s message even after seeing Jesus’ miracles with their own eyes. They were like the son who agreed to serve the Father but never did His will nor repented of their self-righteousness and inner sinfulness. “not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God” (Hebrews 6:1). Repentance of self-righteous goodness is necessary before one can admit the need to repent of sinfulness. Everyone focuses on their own good and overlooks the bad. (Ecclesiastes 3:20)

It is easier for a known sinner to admit he or she is a sinner than it is for an outwardly righteous person to admit that underneath they are sinners just like the harlot. “If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloke for their sin.” (John 15:22) “But we are all as an unclean *thing*, and all our righteousnesses *are* as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. And *there is* none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee: for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast consumed us, because of our iniquities.” (Isaiah 64:6,7). God will save the repentant sinner but not the proud self-righteous religious person. (Psalm 14:1-3) “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32).

Midrash #2 The Wicked Vineyard Manager (21:33-46)

The vineyard lord “let it out,” hired managers and he went into a far country. Servants were sent to collect the profits. The managers beat one, killed another, and stoned the third one (21:35). Other servants were sent and met the same fate (21:36). Finally, he sent his son. They killed him (21:39).

Leading question # 2 When the vineyard owner returns what will he do?

The elders answered, “He will miserably destroy those wicked” managers. He will “let it out” to others who will give him what he is due (21:41). They have just unwittingly pronounced their own condemnation. In chess it’s like when you capture the queen with your king but get killed by the king in one move.

The moral of the midrashim or parables is:

1. God is the Father and the Lord of the Vineyard. He has the authority. Both the sons and the hired managers are under His authority and His commands. The one son and the managers were disobedient and wicked.
2. The heir to the vineyard, is Jesus, God’s son.
3. The elders of Israel were good at talking about God but not obeying God’s messengers.
4. The tax collectors and harlots repented and believed on Jesus.
5. The elders of Israel who saw Jesus’ miracles are the vineyard managers.
6. They were only supposed to manage the vineyard for God’s profit but decided it belonged to them.
7. When God sent His son to collect, they decided to kill him and stay in power. Often those who accuse others of power driven motivation are projecting their actual motives. God did destroy those who usurped His authority and “His House” for their own gain 38 years later in 70 AD. One million Jerusalem residents were slaughtered including the wealthy priestly class. Their homes were looted and burned.

A golden bell ornament from the hem of the High Priest's robe was unearthed in an ancient Jerusalem sewer near the Temple Mount.^{iv} His hem was adorned with golden pomegranates and golden bells. (Exodus 28:33).



8. The kingdom that was prophesied was taken from that generation of Israel (21:43) and will be given to an end-times nation of Israel.

The verse “taken from you and given to another nation,” has been falsely interpreted by historic Christian theology to mean; God took the kingdom from them and gave it to Gentile nations who now replace Israel and benefit from all of God’s covenants and promises to Israel. That is called supersessionism or replacement theology. We fully reject that on the basis that God’s covenants with Israel regarding their existence and ownership of the land are unconditional. Even when they suffered the consequences of displacement because they strayed from God, He promised that they would eternally be a nation and that He would regather them. “Thus saith the LORD, which giveth the sun for a light by day, *and* the ordinances of the moon and of the stars for a light by night, which divideth the sea when the waves thereof roar; The LORD of hosts *is* his name: If those ordinances depart from before me, saith the LORD, *then* the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before me for ever. (Jeremiah 31:35,36). “For, lo, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will bring again the captivity of my people Israel and Judah, saith the LORD: and I will cause them to return to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall possess it” (Jeremiah 30:3).

Here are four renowned Bible scholars refuting the replacement theological position. “The correct interpretation of ‘given to another nation’ means that the kingdom offer is being withdrawn from that generation of Israel in Jesus’ day and will be reoffered to another generation in the future which will accept it.”^v - Dwight J. Pentecost. “These are not two separate and different nations, but the same nation of Israel...That other nation is also Israel, but an Israel repentant and regenerated.”^{vi} – Alva J. McClain “There are two possible illuminations; first, in relationship to Israel present, for the individual Jew who believes to the saving of his soul, which illumination dispels all previous darkness”; and second in relation to Israel future, there is an illumination “for the whole nation.”^{vii} - - Louis Sperry Chaeffer. By another nation “Jesus did not mean the Church, for that is not a nation; rather it will be a future generation of Israel that “ shall turn to the Lord and be saved before entering the millennial kingdom.”^{viii} – Charles C. Ryrie.

“I say then, Hath God cast away his people? God forbid. God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew. I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but *rather* through their fall salvation *is come* unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy. And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again. For if thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and wert grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree: how much more shall these, which be the natural *branches*, be grafted into their own olive tree? And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: For this *is* my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins. (Romans11:23,24)

Midrash #3 The stone which the builders rejected is a quote from Psalm 118:22 & Isaiah 28:16

The third son in these parables represents Jesus, the heir to God’s Vineyard – Israel. Jesus pointed the finger of both parables right at the guilty Chief priests and Pharisees. They were not amused. They wanted to arrest Him, but all the eyes of the believing Jewish multitudes were on Jesus. (21:45,46) Their final scheme is recorded in (26:1-4).

ⁱ Render Unto Caesar? Pilate’s Acquisition of Temple Funds - School of Philosophical, Historical and International Studies (monash.edu)

ⁱⁱ Newly-renovated Wohl Archaeological Museum displays homes of Jewish priests from 70 AD | All Israel News

ⁱⁱⁱ What Is Midrash? | My Jewish Learning

^{iv} Golden Bell Possibly Worn by Temple Priest Found in Jerusalem - Biblical Archaeology Society

^v Israelology, The Missing Link in Systematic Theology, Arnold Fruchtenbaum, 1989, Ariel Ministries, p 380

^{vi} *ibid* p 387

^{vii} *ibid* p 397

^{viii} *ibid* p 498