

Chapter 85: The Messianic Prophet, Priest, and King

Matthew 21:10–17

Jesus, the triumphant king, has made his final approach toward Jerusalem, the capital city of God’s people. It has been easy, however, to ride in on a donkey on the praises of the people. Now that Jesus enters Jerusalem in Matthew 21:10, what will he do? The way forward will continue to be marked by the praises of some, but he will also face the fierce opposition of his enemies, making the path after this point increasingly difficult as he goes. Yet, at this crucial juncture as Jesus steps foot on the soil of Jerusalem, one truth immediately and clearly shines forth: *Jesus is the Messianic Son of David*.

The Messianic Prophet (Matt. 21:10–11)

While the whole triumphal entry of Jesus stretches across Matthew 21:1–11, there are two reasons to separate vv. 10–11 from the preceding narrative. First, the emphasis in v. 11 on Jesus as a messianic prophet connects with his consideration as priest and king in the rest of the passage. We will consider that full picture through the rest of this exposition. Second, it is only in v. 10 that Jesus finally enters into Jerusalem. What had preceded in Matthew 21:1–9 only led up to his actual entry, so that we can consider his arrival in Jerusalem separately from the preceding narrative of his approach toward the city.

Specifically, Matthew tells us that when Jesus entered Jerusalem, “the whole city was stirred up, saying, ‘Who is this?’” (v. 10). France reminds us that this observation forms an important connection to the beginning of the Gospel, when “all Jerusalem” was “troubled” along with King Herod at the news that a new king of the Jews had been born (Matt. 2:3).¹ Previously, the wise men had appeared in Jerusalem, expecting to find the new king there; however, the king was born not in the capital city, but in Bethlehem. Now, thirty-three years later, this king enters triumphantly into Jerusalem, and the city once again reacts strongly to his arrival.

In response to the question about Jesus’ identity, the crowds reported that, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee” (v. 11). This is important statement for a few reasons. First, the crowd identifies Jesus as *the* prophet (ὁ προφήτης; *ho prophētēs*), which alludes to the prophecy that Moses had uttered back in Deuteronomy 18:15: “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen.”² Although the Lord had sent many prophets throughout the years to his people to declare to them his word, the last words of Deuteronomy tell us that, as of the close of the Old Testament canon, “there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face” (Deut. 34:10). The

¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 781.

² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 810.

Israelites had been waiting for this prophet to appear for nearly 1500 years since the days of Moses.

Second, the crowd identifies Jesus the prophet as coming “from Nazareth of Galilee.” The crowd making this declaration, then, is likely the crowd that had “followed” Jesus from Galilee into Jerusalem (Matt. 20:29). Although these Galileans misunderstood much about Jesus, they apparently knew that Jesus was from Galilee, and perhaps that he had done most of his ministry in Galilee up to this point, so that they seem to answer this question with pride.³ Many derided the notion that the Messiah should come from Nazareth of Galilee (John 1:46; 7:52), so Jesus’ provenance was a notable surprise.

The Messianic Priest (Matt. 21:12–13)

After Jesus’ arrival, he cleansed the temple: “And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons” (v. 12). Importantly, the Gospel of John records another temple cleansing at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (John 2:13–22), which differs from this temple cleansing at the end of Jesus’ ministry in two major ways:⁴ (1) the Jews confronted Jesus at the first cleansing, but no one utters a word against Jesus now; (2) during the first cleansing, Jesus not only rebuked the abuse of the temple, but he also challenged the Jews to “destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19), whereas now Jesus issues no such challenge. Although these two cleansings differ, Morris notes that in both Matthew and John, Jesus cleanses the temple upon his first recorded arrival in the city.⁵

Jesus’ cleansing of the temple, then, is of the highest significance, since his actions presumed authority over the operations of the temple. In the Old Testament, both kings and priests worked together to cleanse the temple from the idolatries and false ceremonies of worship that accumulated during Israel’s periods of unfaithfulness (e.g., 1 Kgs. 12:4–16; 23:4–14). Since Jesus does this act alone, Jesus is implicitly declaring himself to be not only the Messianic King, but also the Messianic High Priest.⁶

Additionally, we should recognize that Jesus’ priority in cleansing the temple immediately defied the expectations of the crowds who had cheered his arrival into the city. As Blomberg observes, “The Messiah, having been led in apparent triumph into the city, enters the temple, arousing expectations of pro-Jewish, nationalist action against Rome. Instead, his attack threatens the sacrificial, worship center of Judaism itself.”⁷ Jesus’ criticism that the people had made the temple into “a den of robbers” is scathing. In this criticism, Jesus is alluding to Jeremiah 7:11, when the Lord railed against his people for relying on the temple as a good-luck charm to keep them safe, in spite of their hypocritical wickedness: “Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD’” (Jer. 7:4). As Lenski notes, “A robbers’ den is not

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 810; Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 767.

⁴ For these, see Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 812.

⁵ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 525.

⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:11.

⁷ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 314.

used for robbing but as a refuge for robbers.” That is, the people (both in Jeremiah’s day, as well as in Jesus’ day) abused the temple by treating it as a justification and a means of emboldening them toward more sin: “Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’—only to go on doing all these abominations?” (Jer. 7:9–10). Thus, Lenski comments, “No matter what they do even by violating the sanctity of their Temple, they imagine that their adherence to this Temple will protect and shield them from any penalty.”⁸

Moreover, this cleansing was not one more cleansing in a long line of half measures in Israel’s history. Instead, it was the fulfillment of the prophecy for the eschatological day of the LORD in Zechariah 14:21: “And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day.”⁹ This was, indeed, what Malachi also prophesied: “And the Lord whose you seek will suddenly come to his temple....But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap” (Mal. 3:1–2).¹⁰

Indeed, Jesus was not merely challenging the status quo, but something much more. Since the function of the money-changers was to offer currency exchanges so that Israelites could pay the Temple tax (Ex. 30:16), and since that Temple tax financed the daily burnt offerings of the old covenant sacrificial system, Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner has recognized that Jesus’ actions were further reaching than we might imagine: “For the overturning of the moneychangers’ tables represents an act of the rejection of the most important rite of the Israelite cult, the daily whole-offering, and, therefore, a statement that there is a means of atonement other than the daily whole-offering, which now is null.”¹¹ Soon, by his once-for-all sacrifice, our great High Priest would make the sacrifices of the first covenant obsolete, so that “what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away” (Heb. 8:13).

The Messianic King (Matt. 21:14–17)

In v. 14, Matthew records for us an event from the midst of Jesus’ temple cleansing that no other Evangelist records: “And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them” (v. 14). This is such an important event, and we must look at it from multiple angles. First, we should remember that Jesus had insisted for his Father’s house to be “a house of prayer,” and here we see that “these sufferers prayed to Jesus, the Son in his Father’s House, and none of them prayed in vain.”¹² Second, we should recognize that Jesus’ healing of the blind and lame were the first two pieces of evidence that Jesus provided John the Baptist to confirm that he was the Messiah (Matt. 11:5).¹³

⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 816.

⁹ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 600.

¹⁰ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 784–85.

¹¹ Jacob Neusner, “Money-Changers in the Temple: The Mishnah’s Explanation,” *NTS* 35.2 (1989): 287–90.

¹² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 817.

¹³ “That the authority which Christ had claimed for himself out of the usual course might not be suspected of rashness, he supported it by miracles. He therefore *cured the blind and lame in the temple*, in order to proclaim

Most importantly, though, we should notice the contrast that, “while some people are expelled, others are welcomed.”¹⁴ The fact that Jesus welcomes the blind and the lame is important for two specific reasons. First, among the descendants of Aaron, anyone blind or lame was forbidden from serving as priest before the Lord (Lev. 21:16–18).¹⁵ As Jesus drives out the hypocrites who defile the temple by their trading, for others he heals their ceremonial uncleanness that had limited their access to the temple. Second, when Jesus’ ancestor David had sought to capture Jerusalem, the Jebusite inhabitants had taunted him, saying, “You will not come in here, but the blind and the lame will ward you off” (2 Sam. 5:6). When David did take the city, the positions of David and the blind and lame were then reversed: “Therefore it is said, ‘The blind and the lame shall not come into the house’” (2 Sam. 5:8). France argues, then, that Jesus (the “Son of David”; Matt. 20:30, 31; 21:9, 15) is contrasted with David, since David had driven out the “blind and the lame,” but Jesus heals and welcomes them.¹⁶

After this, the “children” were “crying out in the temple, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’” (v. 15). Though the chief priests and scribes had seen the wonders that Jesus had performed, they were indignant that Jesus permitted these children to hail Jesus as the Son of David (vv. 15–16a). Likely, these boys were the twelve-year-olds (or slightly older) who were coming to Jerusalem for the feast for their first times (Deut. 16:16).¹⁷ Fundamentally, the chief priests and scribes were indignant that young and old were ascribing messianic authority to Jesus, since such claims would undermine their own authority.¹⁸ More than that, Matthew intends for us to see the great hypocrisy of the whole scene:

We must catch the irony in this action as Matthew presents it. The most awful disorder of the buyers and the sellers, the stench of cattle, the bawling and the bleating, the haggling and the dickering, were quite acceptable to these priests and these scribes—there was money in it for them, but these innocent lads who were voicing the praise of Jesus and giving him the title which his great deeds demonstrated was his due, were intolerable to these men.¹⁹

Jesus, however, confronted the Pharisees with a quotation from Psalm 8 to argue that the Scriptures had foretold all this. We do not see any response from the religious leaders, so that Jesus then left to lodge in Bethany for the night (v. 17).

that the rights and honor of Messiah truly belonged to him; for by these marks the prophets describe him.” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:14–15.)

¹⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 771.

¹⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 601.

¹⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 788.

¹⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 817.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:15–16.

¹⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 818.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the city's being "stirred up" compare to the way that "all Jerusalem" was "troubled" along with Herod at the beginning of the Gospel (Matt. 2:3; 21:10)? What does it mean that the people describe Jesus first as "the prophet" (v. 11)? According to Deuteronomy 18:15–18, what kind of prophet were God's people awaiting? How does Jesus fulfill this role (Heb. 1:1–2)? What implications does Jesus' prophetic office have for our salvation?
2. Why does Jesus immediately enter the temple after he enters Jerusalem (v. 12)? How does this temple cleansing compare and contrast with the temple cleansing Jesus performed at the beginning of his public ministry (John 2:13–22)? How did kings and priests work together in the Old Testament to cleanse the temple (1 Kgs. 12:4–16; 23:4–14)? Why is it significant that Jesus cleanses the temple alone?
3. Why did Jesus insist that the temple should be a "house of prayer" (v. 13a)? What does the original context of Jeremiah 7 teach us about Jesus' meaning by calling the current temple a "den of robbers" (v. 13b)? How did Jesus' cleansing of the temple fulfill end-times prophecy (Zech. 14:21; Mal. 3:1–2)? How does Jesus' driving out the moneychangers work toward overturning the old covenant sacrificial system to make it obsolete?
4. What significance does Jesus' healing of the blind and the lame have (v. 14)? Why is it important that the children were crying out "Hosanna to the Son of David!" to Jesus (v. 15)? How did Jesus see their praise as God-ordained, contrary to the concerns of the chief priests and scribes (v. 15–16)? How should this strengthen our convictions that Jesus is the Messianic King? What are the implications of Jesus' kingship for your life?