

Historical Jesus 12: Intensified Conflict

After he enters Jerusalem, Jesus spent his days in the Temple courts teaching the people and his nights on Mount Olivet staying with friends at Bethany (Lk 21:37-38).

Stumper Questions

During Jesus' last week of ministry, three times religious leaders pose him questions designed to entrap him. Right from the start, the chief priests and elders asked him, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" (Matthew 21:23). This question seeks to undermine Jesus' credibility. He doesn't have authority from any of the official leaders to interrupt the goings on in the Temple. His authority comes from God, but they could easily call that into question.

Matthew 21:24-27

24 Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' 26 But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet." 27 So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

Next, the Pharisees and Herodians partnered up to entangle him in his words (Mark 12:13-17). They asked, "Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?" Jesus perceived their hypocrisy and replied, "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." After they brought one to him Jesus asked, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" "Caesar's," they replied. Jesus said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." This answer perfectly avoids both pitfalls this question forces the answerer to fall into. On the one hand, if Jesus said to pay taxes, he would lose credibility with the people. On the other, if he said not to, they would immediately report him to the authorities. Jesus gives the kind of answer that they could understand in different ways, and all they could do was marvel.

The third stumper question came from the Sadducees about resurrection (Luke 20:27-40). They reminded Jesus that Moses had taught them to marry a brother's widow if she didn't have any children. Then they told a preposterous story about seven brothers who all lawfully married the same woman, one after the other. Then they asked, "In the

resurrection, whose wife will the woman be?" Once again, his interlocutors think they have Jesus boxed in. No matter which way he answers, they have come-back ready to throw at him.

Luke 20:34-40

34 And Jesus said to them, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, 35 but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, 36 for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. 37 But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. 38 Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him." 39 Then some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well." 40 For they no longer dared to ask him any question.

Since death ends a marriage, people would have to get remarried in the resurrection. Jesus rejects this notion, averring that God's people will be like the angels who do not marry. Next, Jesus uses an interesting though obscure argument to support his belief in resurrection. Here is how Anthony Buzzard explains Jesus' response:

"The logic of Jesus' argument was simply that since Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had long been dead, there must be a future resurrection to restore them to life, so that their relationship with the living God could be resumed and they could receive what the covenant had guaranteed them. On no account is Jesus' answer to be used as a justification for believing that the patriarchs were *already* alive. The issue between Jesus and his opponents was whether there would be a future resurrection. Jesus argued that the covenant would fail if the patriarchs were left in their graves. For God to be God of the living, the patriarchs must rise to life again in the future resurrection (Dan 12:2)."⁶⁴

An Honest Question

Of course, while Jesus was dueling with the Sadducees, others were listening in. One such man, a scribe, quite enjoyed Jesus' defense of the resurrection (Mark 12:28-34). So, he asked Jesus, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" This was not a stumper question. The scribe is checking Jesus out, but not in an attempt to embarrass or accuse him. He really wants to see where Jesus is coming from. Jesus replies by quoting the Shema—the classic statement of Judaism from Deuteronomy. "Hear, O

⁶⁴ Anthony Buzzard, (Fayetteville, GA: Restoration Fellowship, 1999), p. 65. See also Edward Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse), p 60 and Warren Prestidge, *Life, Death and Destiny* (Auckland, New Zealand: Resurrection Publishing, 1998), pp. 41-2.

Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.” The scribe agreed with Jesus and said, “You have truly said that he is one and there is no other besides him.” To this Jesus replied, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” They agree on the definition of God as a singular individual.⁶⁵ They agree that humanity’s duty is to love the one God with everything and our neighbors as ourselves. This is the one positive interaction Jesus has in this public scene.

Jesus’ Stumper Question

Now that they’ve gone a few rounds on the offensive, Jesus puts them on the defensive by asking his own stumper question (Matthew 22:41-45). To the Pharisees he asked, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” They replied, “The son of David.” Jesus continues:

Matthew 22:43-46

43 He said to them, "How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, 44 "'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? 45 If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?" 46 And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

This is a really tough saying to understand because Jesus doesn’t explain what he means. He poses the question and just lets it hang there in the air. My thought is that Jesus was trying to show them that descending from David is not enough. It is necessary for the Messiah to be a “son of David” but that is not sufficient. Mary was of David’s descendants, but Jesus’ father—well, that’s another story. He is, in fact, the son of God. His mother knew it, the demons knew it, but these critics were clueless. Jesus is both son of David and Son of God.

Parables against His Enemies

Interspersed with them asking Jesus questions, he told several parables. That Jesus could exhibit such creative genius under such hostile conditions boggles my mind. Typically our wit diminishes the more stress we experience.

⁶⁵ That God is one person is clear from the scribe’s usage of the *singular* personal pronoun “he” when he said, “He is one and there is no other besides him.” Thus, Jesus and the Jewish scribe both agree on God’s oneness leaving no room for later Trinitarian conceptions (*pace* Athanasius).

Jesus told them a story about two sons whom their father told to work in the vineyard (Matthew 21:28-32). The first said he wouldn't go but then changed his mind and went, but the second said he would go but then didn't. Jesus asked them which had done his father's will. They replied, "The first." Jesus continued, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him." This kind of direct confrontation was Jesus' style.

Next, he told another parable about wicked tenants who abused and even murdered the representatives the owner sent to collect the fruit (Matthew 21:33-44). Then the master sent his own son, thinking they would have to respect him, but instead they seized him and killed him. Jesus asked, "When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They answered, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons." Unwittingly, they have condemned themselves. They are the tenants, and Jesus is the son. In just a few days, they will kill him, bringing God's judgment down on themselves.

Lastly, Jesus narrated the story of a wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1-14). A king gave a wedding feast for his son, but those whom he invited would not come, so he punished them and opened up the invitation to anyone who was willing to attend. The Pharisees were invited to believe in God's Messiah but did not, though the tax-collectors, prostitutes, and sinners received him warmly. Sadly, even such razor sharp and convicting parables could not penetrate the hard hearts of these people. In the end, they would do just as the parable said.

Jesus did not only use parables, he also pronounced judgment on the Pharisees and scribes directly (Matthew 23). We have already looked at how he accused them of hypocrisy and called them to repentance, so we will not look at that now, though it is good to keep in mind that the eight thunderous woes of Matthew 23 occurred in the context of his last week.

From his triumphal entry to his Temple disturbance to his public confrontations, Jesus' enemies prepared to act. They weren't sure how they could capture him, but they knew they wanted to kill him (as well as Lazarus whom he had raised from the dead, cf. John 12:9-11).

Matthew 26:3-5

3 Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the

high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, 4 and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. 5 But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people."

For his part, Jesus continued preaching openly in the Temple courts to all who would listen.

John 12:42-50

42 Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; 43 for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

In the end, they would have to wait for someone to hatch a plan to whisk Jesus away secretly. But, where did Jesus stay? When could they get to him when he wasn't surrounded by the multitude? If only they had an insider—one of Jesus' inner circle—to tell them where and when they could arrest him....