

By What Authority?

It is two days since the Lord's entrance into Jerusalem and the day after the cursing of the fig tree. Our Saviour, with His disciples, has returned to the city from their accommodation in Bethany, or somewhere near the Mount of Olives. Jesus is walking with the disciples in the temple precincts and teaching a large group of followers and hearers.

The Jewish Sanhedrim

As the Lord brings His message a delegation arrives from the Jewish Sanhedrim, the main council of religious leaders, comprising 'the chief priests, and the Scribes, and the elders'. Full of their own self-importance these men do not hesitate to interrupt the Lord as He speaks. This was not a random meeting but an attempt to silence the Saviour by challenging His authority to teach and preach in the temple, and His recent acts of cleansing the temple of those who bought and sold there.

A plan to 'destroy' Jesus

There is context here. Remember what Mark told us previously. When the Lord accused the authorities of making 'his house' a den of thieves Mark tells us, 'the scribes and chief priests heard it, and sought how they might destroy him: for they feared him, because all the people was astonished at his doctrine'. This is the Saviour's first engagement with the scribes and priests since that occasion and it is part of their plan to 'destroy' the Lord.

By whose authority?

The question posed by these men to the Lord Jesus was designed to ensnare Him and publicly humiliate Him. Previously, the Jewish authorities had tried to counter what Jesus was doing and saying. Now they attacked His person and the whole legitimacy of His ministry. They asked by what authority He taught, preached, did miracles and cleansed the temple. They wanted to know who gave the Lord Jesus Christ authority to do these things!

A charge of blasphemy

If the Lord should answer His authority was from God, these men would charge Him with blasphemy for claiming to be sent directly from God. Everyone knew the established order of the priesthood. Rules for teaching in the temple were settled long ago. Alternatively, if Christ should claim He had His authority from men, they would promptly deny He had it from them, as custodians of the temple. Either way, He must be an imposter.

'Answer me'

Make no mistake, this was a crucial face-off between the Lord and His enemies. He knew their hearts and intentions. Though He paused from teaching to respond, the Saviour gave them no respect by taking their question. Instead, He met their question with one of His own. In fact, His reply asserted dominance over them. There was power in His 'answer me'. The Lord would have no politician's evasion. He was holding them accountable. They should speak honestly without dodging the issue.

The legacy of John

Of course, they could not. The Lord's question concerning John's ministry was not difficult but the priests and scribes realised they could not answer without condemning themselves. The Lord asked, 'The baptism of John, was it from heaven, or of men?' They knew if they said John's ministry had divine authority they would condemn themselves because then they ought to have honoured and followed John, and believed on the One whom John identified as the Messiah. This they did not do.

We cannot tell

Yet publicly stating John was no true prophet was problematic. It was also dangerous. John was highly esteemed among the common people and continued to have admiration and strong support amongst Jesus' own followers, many of whom were present. So what to do? Feigning ignorance was not easy for men with an answer for everything, but it seemed the best option.

Hypocrites

The prevarication of the priests exposed their hypocrisy. They were neither honest nor sincere. They knew it, and the Lord knew it, too. Christ had agreed to answer their question upon their answering His but when they could not, or rather would not, the Lord justifiably withheld His answer from them concerning His own authority.

Implied, if not stated

Yet, such was the wisdom in Jesus' words concerning the ministry of John these men were left in no doubt about what they had been told. Like John, Christ's authority came not from man but from God; and just as John had divine authority and did not need man's leave to preach and minister, neither did Christ. Christ was neither dependent on, nor accountable to, these men or their religious hierarchy, but had His commission directly from God Himself.

Rubbing salt in the wound

The scheme of the priests and scribes to silence Jesus had fallen at the first fence. They had all marched in proudly to confront the Lord before the people, and now they must all creep out ashamed. Before they did, and as they stood, rooted as it were to the spot, the Lord preached a number of parables to the gathered crowd in which He exposed and judged the dishonesty of these religious hypocrites.

Resolved to murder

As they listened and understood that Christ spoke of them, their resolve to destroy Jesus increased. Matthew describes an event that took place later that night. He says, 'Then assembled together the chief priests, and the scribes, and the elders of the people, unto the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, And consulted that they might take Jesus by subtilty, and kill him.'

Amen

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