

JESUS' GOAL FOR TEMPLE AND TREE:  
A THEMATIC REVISIT OF MATT 21:12–22

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Perhaps the most puzzling public action of Jesus was his curse of the fig tree. The accounts of it in Matthew 21 and Mark 11 have generated a diversity of interpretations. In the past few decades many scholars have sought to exegete these passages with an eye to understanding how the withered-tree account bears on what happened in the temple since these two dramatic actions are found side by side in both gospels. Some scholars interpret the tree story as an incident that actually happened and that is recounted in proximity to the temple event because the two occurred within a few days of each other.<sup>1</sup> But even among scholars who deny an historical withering are many who approach the two dramatic actions of Jesus as mutually illuminating stories. Thus Paul Minear asserts that bringing the two episodes together helps Matthew's church deal courageously with hostility from Jewish religious authorities, since it assures them that the Master had already overcome such opponents.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore a good many scholars believe that the temple and tree episodes were set together in Matthew (and in Mark) because each was felt to shed interpretative light on the other. This is a worthy exegetical first move.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, throughout the present study we will assume that this approach is valid.

Most commentators who consider the temple and fig-tree accounts to be complementary, however, insist on that correspondence only to a point. The great majority do not view Matt 21:18–22 as a coherent unit relating back to 21:12–17. They understand only vv. 18–19 to refer to the preceding section. Frequently these scholars explain that the transition from Jesus' miracle to his teaching on prayer—in the form of the disciples' question—reads

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<sup>2</sup> P. S. Minear, *Matthew: The Teacher's Gospel* (New York: Pilgrim, 1982) 111.

<sup>3</sup> Verses 12 and 23 indicate that Jesus performed these actions in relation to the temple. The verses form an envelope within which the cursed tree becomes a significant part of the assertion of Jesus' authoritative relationship to the Jewish faith. Also the theme of prayer from God's people both opens and closes 21:12–22 (see vv. 13, 22), probably indicating another intended inclusio.

awkwardly because it is artificial, since the miracle story and the teaching

actually were brought together at a later date.<sup>4</sup> Others argue that the evangelist dutifully preserves the event (along with the prayer instruction) in imitation of Mark, perhaps because he wants to give themes like faith (Matt 8:5–13; 14:22–32; 16:5–12) and believing prayer (6:5–13, 16–18; 7:1–12; 17:14–21) as much emphasis as possible.<sup>5</sup>

It seems, then, that the possibility that 21:18–22 as a whole brings forward the flow of thought that begins with v. 12 deserves further consideration. In order to explore such possibilities we will need to examine the theological motifs in 21:12–17 that may be preparing us as readers to appreciate what is said in the section that follows (vv. 18–22).

As a first step we will show that the eschatological-new-people theme, while relevant to what Matthew does later in chap. 21, fails to provide a reasonable thematic unity that also explains why we find the temple and tree incidents in juxtaposition. An alternative controlling theme will be proposed: the worship and prayer expected from God's people. This proposal will be the working hypothesis tested for its fit throughout the remainder of the present study. Second, we will make three observations about Jesus' quest (both in the temple and beside the road) for fruitfulness to God among his chosen people:<sup>6</sup> (1) True fruitfulness is epitomized in proper worship and prayer, (2) recognition of Jesus' authority becomes crucial evidence of a person's ability to bear fruit in the new day that his public appearance (and private curse) shows is even now breaking through, and (3) Jesus remained alert not only to negative responses (especially of the religious rulers) but to positive ones that intimated that there were some who through Jesus would become renewed to fruitbearing. Third, we will summarize what has been said about the thematic unity of Matt 21:12–22 and then attempt to answer our primary question: Would Matthew's early audience have felt that the disciples' question in v. 20 diverted Jesus from the agenda that had preoccupied him in the temple into a quite unrelated train of thought (vv. 21–22)?

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J. L. McKenzie, "The Gospel According to Matthew," *JBC* 2.99. The disciples' question in Matt 21:20 is "artificially conceived" according to W. R. Telford (*The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree* [JSNTSup 1; Sheffield: JSOT, 1980] 78). Similarly V. Taylor (*The Gospel According to St. Mark* [2d ed.; London: Macmillan, 1966] 458–459) views the story of the cursed tree in Mark to have been originally independent of the teaching on prayer that follows it.

<sup>5</sup> Thus D. A. Hagner (*Matthew 14–28* [WBC 33b; Dallas: Word, 1995] 606–607) leads us to conclude that when Matthew includes the disciples' question about the power of the miracle he is simply following the tradition and does not elucidate the temple-tree connection (unlike Mark).

<sup>6</sup> According to D. A. Carson ("Matthew," *Expositor's Bible Commentary* [ed. F. E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984] 8.445), most who write on this passage take the curse to be against Israel for failing to produce fruit, especially in their attitude toward Jesus. Several commentators (e.g. J. C. Fenton, *The Gospel of St Matthew* [Baltimore: Penguin, 1964] 336) read back an emphasis on fruitfulness from 21:41–43. Often, however, this is done in terms that (in our view, prematurely) fasten upon the distinctions between Israel and the new people of God. Very helpful on the theme of a search for fruitfulness are the comments of B. Charette (*The Theme of Recompense in Matthew's Gospel* [JSNTSup 79; Sheffield: JSOT, 1992] 133–135).

## I. A NEW PEOPLE: THE LEADING THEME?

Our first candidate for a unifying theme is that of a new or renewed people of God who begin to be formed with the arrival of the new age in Jesus' (messianic) ministry and who require capable leadership.<sup>7</sup> The question here is whether in 21:12–22 the redactor is presenting Jesus as scrutinizing the spiritual leadership of Israel in order to apply Jesus' teaching to the situation of the later ecclesiastical counterpart of that leadership.

If in 21:12–22 Jesus finds the leaders of Israel's religious practice to be blind and lame themselves (v. 14; cf. v. 16), and if only the Twelve are privy to the fig-tree miracle, perhaps Jesus is envisioning these select disciples as the future leaders of God's people.<sup>8</sup> In that case Jesus would be preparing these men for carrying out their task (21:21–22). The "mountainous" obstacles or opposition they are destined to face as leaders would call for active and secure "faith in God" (Mark 11:22). On the other hand, perhaps the imminent outmoding of the temple cultus constitutes a call to more bold and profound prayer.<sup>9</sup>

It is true that such ideas readily suggest themselves. When we read backwards from the parable message in Matt 21:43, 45, it is possible to see Jesus urging his disciples to outperform the rejected leaders of old Israel (vv. 21–22) in faithfulness and spiritual effectiveness. But should we allow this motif to be the primary consideration determining how we understand 21:12–22?

It seems warranted to tread cautiously here. For one thing, we find an emphasis on leadership only when we read between the lines of the text. Jesus himself, rather than other leaders, commands center stage both in the temple and beside the road. The Twelve do not serve as foils to the religious leaders in terms of their superior comprehension of what is going on.<sup>10</sup> Rather, Matthew reserves the role of foil for the children in the temple. Their chants, carrying forward the earlier hosannas of the crowds (21:9), affirm that Jesus' demonstration and healings have an unmistakably messianic

<sup>7</sup> Hagner e.g. indicates (*Matthew 14–28* 604, 606) that the curse signals the end of national Israel and God's intention to do something new, a new thing that obviously involves the chosen followers whom Jesus instructs in vv. 21–22. D. J. Harrington (*The Gospel of Matthew* [Collegeville: Liturgical, 1991] 297–298) emphasizes that the destruction of the tree points to God's judgment not upon Israel as a whole but upon her corrupt leadership.

<sup>8</sup> In support of this we might note that Matthew has the Twelve making the comment on the withered tree (21:20) whereas Mark has Peter speak (Mark 11:21). Thus if Matthew depended on Mark for his account the Twelve might be understood to be positioned here in relationship to Jesus as founding members of a new community of God.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. C. L. Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992) 319; P. J. Achtemeier (*Mark* [2d ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986] 23–25).

<sup>10</sup> It seems rather clear in 21:12–22 that Matthew does anything but give the disciples high marks for comprehension. Notice as well that Matthew in this section does not directly mention the presence of the disciples at the temple. Scholarly debate over the understanding of the disciples in Matthew began with G. Barth, "Matthew's Understanding of the Law," in G. Bornkamm, G. Barth and H. J. Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 58–164, esp. 105–116. Cf. further A. H. Trotter, Jr., *Understanding and Stumbling: A Study of the Disciples' Understanding of Jesus and His Teaching in the Gospel of Matthew* (dissertation; Cambridge University, 1986); M. J. Wilkins, *The Concept of Disciple in Matthew's Gospel* [NovTSup 59; Leiden: Brill, 1988].

quality to them. Therefore we find nothing concrete in 21:12–22 to suggest that the disciples' role is important to the meaning of vv. 12–17.

We should note as well that in our text the twelve disciples are not elevated above others who are responding to Jesus in a positive manner. Instead, they take their position among other sets of people whose responses toward Jesus are recorded. Not idealized in the least, the disciples simply remain men who have a history with Jesus (and a mission they will be fully entrusted with later) that has convinced them (through divine illumination) that Jesus is Master and Messiah (16:13–28). Nor does Jesus plainly indicate that a new community will arise in which the present authorities have no place—so that in our present section the *mathētai* should be considered the new leaders of God's people—until we reach 21:28–22:14.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore the new-people theme is not to be ignored in relation to vv. 12–22, but it is not present conspicuously—nor does the place of the disciples as the leaders of this people come to the fore.<sup>12</sup> That is why we propose that the theme of a new people should be considered subordinate to a more leading motif that is clearly integral both to vv. 12–17 and vv. 18–22. This primary motif is a kind of worship and prayer among the people of God that epitomizes the fruitfulness that he expects from them. This concern on Jesus' part for fruitbearing that involves spiritual harmony with God is difficult to overlook. For instance, it is in terms of prayer and worship that Jesus explains his temple demonstration (21:12–13). Similarly his inspection of the fig tree concerns its bearing of fruit (vv. 18–19), while the outcome of that inspection tells us what Jesus had uncovered about whether the people and practices that dominated the temple were truly God-oriented.

## II. JESUS' QUEST FOR FRUIT

We will approach the theme of fruitfulness in prayer primarily from the negative side—that is, we will look at what fruit Jesus' twin actions with the temple and the tree indicate was missing or, at least, why the absence of that fruit was so significant.

1. *Prayer and worship as epitome.* God expects a fruitfulness from his people that is expressed by seeking covenantal communion with him in prayer and true worship (cf. John 4:23). For Matthew, fruitlessness is just the opposite of that. It is withholding the devotion and obedience that God has a right to expect. Of all places, it is in the temple that God ought to receive the purest form of worship. Yet in the temple Jesus articulates one complaint

<sup>11</sup> Admittedly the disciples are conceived of as leaders of at least a renewed Israel in 19:28–30 (see also 20:20–28) prior to the passages with which we are dealing. But in our section the disciples are bystanders or learners and are not described as understanding themselves as future leaders in 21:18–22.

<sup>12</sup> As soon as Jesus finds the tree fruitless (and worthless) and then in 21:19 curses it so that it withers, the reader who understands the symbolic identity between Israel and fig trees senses that in some sense God is about to hand over the place occupied by Israel. That teaching is neither brought out nor developed in detail here, however. Rather, it is brought to our attention by the parables that follow (21:28–22:14).

only: that God's house is being used in ways that distract from its being the center of worship it should be. Then, after Jesus has cleansed the temple and has had his exchange with the authorities there, he finds a fig tree full of leaves but barren of fruit, and he curses it. It seems natural to take this curse to express Jesus' response to what he had experienced at the temple on the previous day. Where fruit should have been present there, all he had found was a dead tree (uselessness instead of productivity).<sup>13</sup> His initial inspection of the temple uncovered practices that were suppressing the spiritual vitality of worshipers. By the time Jesus cursed the tree, he had pinned the greatest blame for this situation on an intractable failure on the part of the institution (or of its spiritually bankrupt leaders).

Only one group is presented here as actively opposed to what Jesus was standing for: the religious rulers of the Jews. The fact that the authorities allowed improprieties in the temple (the objects of his cleansing activity)<sup>14</sup> proved how negligent they had been about keeping Israel's religious life vital.<sup>15</sup> But behind that there also lay a root of personal spiritual indifference. It manifested itself in their continued resistance to the only reasonable conclusion about Jesus' personal identity as God's authoritative agent.<sup>16</sup> The combined weight of this double failure on the part of the rulers presumably convinced Jesus that never again could spiritual productivity characterize their piety. Their spiritual deadness was incurable and called for God's judgment.

2. *Response to Jesus' authority.* For Matthew, the authority of Jesus and its relationship to the fruit that God expects from his people remains focal. As we realize by the time we get to Matt 21:18–19, Jesus is the regal Lord of the temple who comes to inspect it for the fruitfulness that God requires (the Davidic king of Zech 9:9–10 [see Matt 21:5; Isa 62:11] is tied to the Messiah of Zech 4:4 and so is associated with a cleansed land and temple in 14:20–21).<sup>17</sup> Jesus is authorized to bring people into submission under God's kingdom rule. This undeniable personal authority, remarked on pre-

<sup>13</sup> We provide evidence for this interpretation further on in this study.

<sup>14</sup> What those abuses were is more difficult to determine, although the situation is clarified in part by means of comparing the synoptic (and Johannine) parallels. It is possible that Matthew is deliberately vague about the exact nature of the abuses. But if so, we cannot be certain why he is not more specific. But the crucial thing for Matthew is that the leaders permitted the abuses and thereby failed to uphold God's glory through a modeling of proper worship and ethics.

<sup>15</sup> W. L. Lane (*Commentary on the Gospel of Mark* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974] 404–405) justifies Jesus' zeal in the temple in terms of a pious demonstration like that of Phinehas. More recently C. A. Evans ("Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?," *CBQ* 51 [1989] 237–270) has argued in a similar vein that Jesus' demonstration was a cleansing rather than a portent of the temple's destruction. See also the discussion by M. D. Hooker (*The Gospel According to Saint Mark* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991] 264–265), who cites the familiar temple cleansings under Josiah (2 Kings 23) and Judas Maccabaeus (1 Macc 4:36–59).

<sup>16</sup> For helpful explanation of how in 21:15–16 worship is related to receptivity to Jesus' presence and claims see M. A. Powell, "A Typology of Worship in the Gospel of Matthew," *JSNT* 57 (1995) 3–17, esp. 14–16.

viously in this gospel more than once (such as in Matt 7:28–29), characterizes the way in which Jesus carries out the whole of his mission for God.

More specifically, in Matthew 21 the centrality of Jesus' authority (and recognition of it by others) makes sense of a swift turn in the narration. After only two verses dealing with the unrighteous management of the temple, all at once (21:14–16) the narrative begins to contrast those who rule it with the groups of people who welcome Jesus after his authoritative action there. As the narrative following v. 11 moves swiftly toward the climactic curse, implicit criticism of the leaders for failing to provide proper guidance for the Jews (vv. 11–12) gives way to a direct confrontation with these leaders. They have failed to perceive that Jesus' actions (cleansing and healings) were just what should be expected from "the Son of David" (vv. 15–16). In Jesus' effective curse the next day (v. 19) we see God (as revealed in Jesus and represented by him) declaring the situation to be irreversible. As the parable in chap. 23 shows, these leaders have become hardened in their unwillingness to let God rule over them.

Criticism of the leaders will continue through and beyond chap. 21. In the pericopes to follow, the spiritual unsuitability of the leaders is cast in terms of mounting antipathy against Jesus' evident authority and implicit claims. In this sense the temple cleansing has merely set the stage for a larger outcome that continues on through the next few chapters: the rejection of the Lord in the temple. After the cursing episode it becomes particularly evident that from now on Jesus' agenda (and popularity) will find no welcome among the rulers, due to their secularized priorities and vested interests.<sup>18</sup> The latter become quickly galvanized for a murderous reprisal. Jesus indeed will be rejected in the temple rather than obtaining fruit for God from its leaders or from their form of religion.

We must hasten to note, however, that it is Jesus' authority and not the failure of the leaders of God's ancient people to respond to it (see Rom 3:1–4) that carries the day. For even as the one who announced God's imminent judgment upon organized Judaism, Jesus remained the one fully in charge of the situation. For one thing, Jesus' authority is evident in his exact knowledge of how God looks at contemporary Judaic practice (especially in terms of the leaders' failure) as dramatized in the curse. If fruit unto God had not yet come, then, as vv. 41 and 43 reiterate, it never would (or perhaps, it must not ever<sup>19</sup>—so that the tree must be hacked down, as in 3:10;

<sup>17</sup> These Scriptural connections were suggested by C. A. Evans in a lecture at Wheaton College on October 23, 1996. Other canonical references that are frequently cited as relating to God's assessment of fruitfulness from his people—some with messianic associations in context or in intertestamental usage—include Isa 5:1–7; Jer 7:11 (drawn from Matt 21:13); 8:13; Hos 9:10, 16; Mic 7:1; Hag 2:19; Mal 3:1–10.

<sup>18</sup> When we as readers reach the exchange over Jesus' authority in 21:23–27, it comes readily to mind that v. 16a has already prepared us for this kind of controversy. The objection of the rulers to the children's accolades (vv. 15–16) has provided a first glimpse of the intense antagonism that is building. Of course while Jesus previously had predicted his death at the hands of the Jewish leaders (e.g. 16:21; 20:17–19), it is not until 21:46 that we have a clear indication that people were actually plotting his death.



day of such implications of the curse, the decisive tone of the curse may have

renewed their fears (Matt 17:23b).<sup>23</sup> But even if the Twelve partially grasped the symbolism of the fig tree (it symbolized Israel, perhaps in terms of her leaders<sup>24</sup>), or at least were upset by the eerie suddenness and finality of the curse, they did not venture to ask Jesus why the tree had to wither so quickly. They only asked how it had done so.

Jesus' authority and person remain central to God's judgment in yet one other sense. Jesus seems to consider his public appearance in the temple to be a decisive revelation that separates the kind of person who may still become fruitful from the one who will always remain dead toward God. Life and death are seen to be the two options, and the reader is led to infer that it is only acceptance of Jesus that brings one to know the living God. Therefore when the chief priests and teachers of the law object to the children's acclamations, Jesus scorns such impropriety and treats the rulers like he did the merchants: as those who keep others from proper worship and allegiance. He also goes on to suggest (21:23–27) that those leaders, who have refused to reform ever since John appeared, can only be expected to ignore the one to whom John had pointed (lest he endanger their hegemony).<sup>25</sup> (Even in 3:7–10 fruitlessness involves not being responsive to the call to prepare for the Messiah.) What they are refusing, though, is far more determinative of the future than they can fathom. For what Jesus is about to do will separate those judged and rejected from those who through loyalty to him will be renewed spiritually (see the parables in 21:28–22:14) as made possible under the covenant of his own blood.<sup>26</sup>

In the meantime, the stances that various groups take toward the claims and actions of Jesus are virtually called forth by his powerful presence: They are presented as reactions that are elicited while Jesus looks on rather than

<sup>23</sup> Did they perhaps sense that this action foreshadowed other confrontations that were still to come as they continued being loyal to their Master and his cause (see John 11:16)?

<sup>24</sup> Hooker (*Saint Mark* 263–265) points out Jer 8:13, where God's judgment of Judah is blamed on the false scribes and priests.

<sup>25</sup> Clearly the authorities recognize at least the public perception of Jesus' authority. Matthew appears to assume that it is this recognition of Jesus' authority (and the attendant fear of incurring public disfavor) that keeps the leaders from arresting Jesus. The sense that Jesus' actions have caught them off guard is conveyed by the narrative time that has to pass before they are prepared to raise another of their characteristically shrewd questions (v. 23).

<sup>26</sup> Clearly, then, it is inadequate to assert that Jesus is authoritative here merely as a prophet who reveals the mind of God. The crucial issue addressed from various angles throughout Matthew 21 is the identity of this authoritative person. In my view it is specifically Jesus' authority as Messiah that is prominent in 21:1–27. (Cf. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* 591, 600; D. L. Lukito, "The Cleansing of the Temple: An Analysis of the Intention of Jesus," *Stulos Theological Journal* 1/1 [May 1993] 31–42, with accompanying references.) Among other indications of this is the fact that Jesus is portrayed more than once as accepting the title "Son of David"; cf. Jesus' own point that David's son is superior to David (22:41–45).

as ones that just occur. This makes his final week of ministry—as the decisive and immediately effective curse indicates—an eschatological hour of decision for Israel. Already the gathering together in the last days of a people who delight in God's will is beginning (in anticipation of when God will renew "all things," 19:28). Soon a new covenant (Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 36:25–31) will produce an influx of people who will bear genuine fruit (see Matt 13:23; 21:43).

3. *Prospects of future fruitfulness.* Our final observation about the fruit-bearing theme begins with the sense Matthew gives us that in Jerusalem Jesus was paying attention to how people reacted to this authority—that is, to all indications of fruitfulness. What he found were differences between people in their receptivity, including some reactions that were quite positive. Some acknowledged his authority, at least implicitly. But the leaders and their allies—in whom Jesus still hoped he could encourage a new spiritual vulnerability—proved instead to lead the way in resisting God's revelation.

That Jesus remained alert to reactions to his authority is brought out by how 21:8–17 allows the responses elicited by the temple cleansing and healings to make their own commentary on what they were meant to signify to the groups in the story. (In fact, Jesus' quotations of Scripture—whether to interpret them [v. 13] or to affirm other people's interpretations of them [v. 16]—are the only other notices given about the significance of his actions.) Although these are superficial trigger responses, they suit the evangelist's purpose. They notify readers that as Jesus stood by and watched (as it were) to see what people would make of him, he was finding some responses that encouraged him—even if he also was finding stubborn incomprehension among the rulers that greatly disappointed him.

We have discussed already the failure of the rulers to recognize God's man at this most crucial of moments. We also have brought out the implication that accompanied this: that they were now disqualified in God's sight from ever bearing fruit to his glory. But before we continue, we should examine further another possibility: Could Jesus have been hoping that the leaders would soften toward God when they met him in the temple?

The way in which the evangelist orders the events of our section leads the reader/listener to understand the curse as the consequence of the absence of fruit. But could not that lack of fruit have been more than his interpretation of the temple abuses? Jesus had long been aware of the spiritually impoverished state of contemporary Jewry, so the abuses in the temple would hardly have surprised him. In addition the text seems to lead us to construe Jesus' curse of the tree as expressing his own sense that a particular expectation has been disappointed. Our question is whether it is valid to link that sense of disappointment to a specific expectation on Jesus' part.

Two items in our text indicate that this disappointment was indeed a specific and personal one that emerged from the immediate situation of responses toward Jesus. One is that Jesus is said to approach the tree because "he was hungry" (v. 18), so that the ensuing curse (a harsh and hardly characteristic action) expresses a sense of letdown taken somewhat personally.

The other is that the object of Jesus' curse must have committed some kind of ultimate offense for a complete withering to take place. The emphasis on how quickly the withering occurred (21:19–20) seems to accentuate the fact that the tree has been found already lifeless in all but appearance and will inevitably continue that way. But beyond that, this deadness is announced at what was a high point of revelation to Israel: Jesus' public appearance as the promised humble king (21:5). Therefore at this crucial point in God's timetable the rulers' refusal to acknowledge that Jesus' authority was from God constituted a rejection of their deathbed opportunity to receive his blessing. It was this that Jesus discovered among these leaders: a specific and inexcusable unreadiness to respond to his messianic revelation.<sup>27</sup>

Thus Matthew's text leads us to believe that as Jesus enters the temple he hopes to observe spiritual receptivity among some of the leaders. Nevertheless all of this is not to say that he considers it very likely that some kind of new response will be forthcoming.<sup>28</sup> The most we can insist on is that he wants to leave room for it to happen and that, for as long as he can, he will continue to afford people a chance to repent.

But there are two other groups of people in which Jesus actually is able to detect sparks of spiritual receptivity that are theoretically capable of being fanned into a full-fledged sacrifice of praise to God. Both groups are viewed in terms of their relationship to the temple and yet are set off from the religious leaders by way of contrast. In fact it is those leaders who turn out to be the truly blind (cf. 21:14 with 23:16–19, 23–24) and the spiritually infantile whose viewpoint should not be taken seriously (see vv. 15–16 and v. 27b; cf. 11:16–19). The first group is the blind and the lame. They are allowed to tangibly experience the significance of Jesus' presence in the temple as the one who saves and delivers. The other group is the children (21:15b). Their declarations of the truth about Jesus present a semblance of worshipful receptivity to Jesus that stands for spiritual readiness among the rank and file at the festival who previously have chanted the same words (21:9) in the streets.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Some commentators (e.g. Carson, "Matthew" 8.445) favor a contrasting view: that what was criticized and condemned here was a long-term and generic appearance of fruitfulness (i.e. hypocrisy).

<sup>28</sup> For instance, if Luke 13:35 is more chronologically correct when it indicates that about a week before the crucifixion Jesus wept over Jerusalem (Matthew puts this in 23:37–39—that is, after the temple cleansing rather than before it), Jesus most certainly did not expect Israel to say "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" anytime prior to his own execution (cf. C. Blomberg, "The Miracles as Parables," *The Miracles of Jesus* [ed. D. Wenham and C. Blomberg; Sheffield: JSOT, 1986] 332). At that point, however, he did not necessarily know how long it would be before he would die and how well people might respond to him in Jerusalem (even if only with fickleness; see John 2:23–25).

<sup>29</sup> Some commentators on Mark's gospel claim that the hosannas heralded Jesus not as David's son but simply as "he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Mark 11:9)—that is, that Mark is more authentic. R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 411, 413, presents a less radical version of this viewpoint. A hint in the direction of a defense of Matthew's historical accuracy in this matter is the fact that even Mark records the crowd's declaration that Jesus' arrival is connected to "the coming kingdom of our father David" (11:10). Taylor (*St. Mark* 457) considers the latter phrase to be an authentic part of the tradition available to Mark rather than a later addition.

The evangelist seems to suggest, then—particularly in regard to the festival crowds whose acclaim continues on the lips of babes—that such people, if they submitted to Jesus' kingdom rule, could be nurtured into renewed faithfulness to God and his purposes. Their welcoming reception of Jesus in Jerusalem has already shown that at least the beginnings of readiness are present. Therefore we can perceive one sense in which Jesus, even while pronouncing inevitable judgment for some of God's people or for Israel's religious institutions, is also looking forward to the reception of the good news by many others. From Matthew's point of view, such renewal of God's people will come through submission to the yoke of Jesus (11:28–30) and personal commitment to him as the coming near of God himself (1:23; 27:54; 28:20).

### III. CONCLUSIONS

1. *Thematic unity.* Our approach to these twin accounts in Matthew 21 has sought to make sense of them as a single unit. The theme uniting them has been the quest for fruitfulness among God's people. Jesus finds Israel's leaders in particular to be guilty of discouraging fruit and of becoming hardened against renewal on any terms other than their own. The place of the curse as the high point of the narrative movement clarifies that Jesus, after the temple confrontation, decisively detached himself from all lingering hopes that reformatory efforts could bring the Jews (or their leaders) to be "praise" to God ("Jew" means "praise," as in Rom 2:29). His disciples became witnesses to God's personal confirmation of that sad fact (the fully withered tree), and they were called to act in the spreading of the gospel in terms of the new twists in God's program. The upshot of all of this is not primarily negative, for the teachings on prayer invite the disciples to be part of the plan of God that was at stake in the cursing of the tree with the result that God's people begin to bear fruit.

2. *The logic of prayer and withering.* It remains, then, to clarify just how Matthew's addressees would have understood the fig-tree issue to have remained on Jesus' mind as he presented teaching on prayer. Jesus' quest for fruitfulness in both the cleansing and the cursing is readily detectable. The action of cursing is the high point of the narrative, presenting itself as his conclusive reaction to the resistance of the rulers to his public self-disclosure. It therefore seems likely that Matthew's audience will have noticed and appreciated these themes and their interconnections.

But if it is right for us to suppose that such matters were transparent, is it not clear as well that the original readers/hearers would never have considered the question about how the curse had its effects so rapidly to be an awkward transition into the teaching about prayer? It seems that at worst they would have taken the question to be off track in only a mild sense.

As to their understanding of the events of Jesus' day, Matthew's early audience would have realized quite readily that the disciples' question permitted Jesus to teach those men how to pray as an integral part of their participation in his bringing God's people to fruitfulness. Similarly the sud-

denness on which the disciples remarked (*parachrēma* is repeated twice [vv. 19–20] and is emphatic in v. 20)<sup>30</sup> turns out to provide the perfect transition into instructions for effective prayer. The disciples needed acutely the Lord's reminder that spiritual equipment (prayer, faith) was required for confronting the upcoming mountains of difficulty and of uncertainty about how God would carry out his plans (most immediately, Jesus' own coming death; after Pentecost, a revised future for the Jewish leaders [see Acts 2:23, 40; 7:51–53] on account of the same realities that had required Jesus' curse).

The problem is further minimized when it comes to how Matthew's audience would have taken this narrative to address their own situation. For instance the curse would be seen as simply part of the carrying out of God's plan, involving a decisive turn in God's patient expectation of fruit from what had become a ruined tree (see 3:10; 7:19). And prayer, too, would be understood as participation in that broader plan.

But it still remained for these believers to learn the old lessons as they applied to a new context. Perhaps most of all they needed to recognize that, despite the meager Jewish response to the gospel, God was still carrying out his purposes. For some of them the need here was to grasp the implications of the extension of God's plan beyond a simple renewal of the people of God under the old covenant. But beyond that, everyone needed reminding that Jesus himself had given his promise (16:18) to make the Church ultimately successful in extending the community of God (that task being integral to the new teaching about fruitbearing).

As they pursued this mission they would be carrying out Jesus' own quest for fruitfulness<sup>31</sup> with full knowledge of what God wanted accomplished and, therefore, of what they should pray for in the meantime.<sup>32</sup> As Jesus had done whatever his Father wanted, so they must pray to see his purposes carried out.<sup>33</sup> Any mountain (12:21) of peril or difficulty that they would encounter in the process would not need to discourage them but could provide instead a call to faith. (Thus injunctions to believe both precede and follow v. 21b.)

<sup>30</sup> Telford (*Barren Temple* 74–75). "The term emphasizes the immediacy of the response in a way that a more ambiguous term like *euthus* would not" (p. 74).

<sup>31</sup> Matthew presents the mission to the world as part of what his followers are busy implementing. That mission is conceived of to a significant degree as continuing the preaching mission on which Jesus sent out the disciples, or else the value of much of chap. 10 would be lost on the later Church (cf. Carson, "Matthew" 8.242–243). That mission—left incomplete at least in a formal sense in Matthew's narration of it—is not fully filled out until after the great commission is given in chap. 28 (and until the Spirit is given [Acts 1–2; see John 15–17]). See more recently M. A. Powell, "The Mission of Jesus and the Mission of the Church in the Gospel of Matthew," *Trinity Seminary Review* 16/2 (1994) 77–84.

<sup>32</sup> Prayer is said to call for faith that can ask for whatever God wants (v. 21). Cf. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* 606; D. Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 295–296.

<sup>33</sup> See R. A. Edwards, *Matthew's Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 74.

Their calling was to courageous living and mission. But it was Jesus who would bear fruit for God through this people truly devoted to God. And in the meantime the prayer of faith (v. 22) would be a crucial means by which Jesus would shape and nurture them into that prayerful community that he once had hoped the Jewish nation would become (v. 13).