

Who Gave Jesus the Authority To Do These Things?

There is a story about a couple who completed their tax forms and gave them to the government. Except that they left something out and eventually the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) contacted them and explained that they had failed to indicate who was the head of the household. So, the IRS asked “Who is the head of the household?” The couple answered that they had been arguing over that question and could not agree. Then they added that they would let the IRS agent know when they decided. The issue they struggled with was authority in the home. Authority exists everywhere: at the government level, the local level, in universities, social groups, churches, businesses, homes, and in marriage. Authority determines who controls how an organization functions and how rules are made. God has established authority for us from the top of government to the husband in marriage and the father in the home. Authority is derived from God Himself. It exists today, and it existed at the time of Christ. Our study is about the authority Christ exercised, and it comes from Matthew 21:23-27; Mark 11:27-33; and Luke 20:1-8.

Sanhedrin Council Confronts Jesus. Jesus has just finished giving the disciples a lesson on how to have their prayers answered. They needed His teaching because the disciples continued struggling with little faith. Great faith remembers what God has done, prays according to the Father’s will, and is evidenced by righteousness. That occurred Tuesday morning, 29 March A.D. 33.

The events in this study occurred later in the morning after Jesus and the disciples arrived in Jerusalem. About 18% of the gospel of Matthew is devoted to this one day in Jesus’ life. This day was filled with confrontations between Jesus and the Jewish religious

leaders. It contains multiple stinging rebukes to the Pharisees and the Olivet Discourse. It was a very busy day for Jesus and the disciples. In the end, the events further motivated the religious leaders to kill Jesus and they did three days later. Now let’s discover what occurred on that Tuesday.

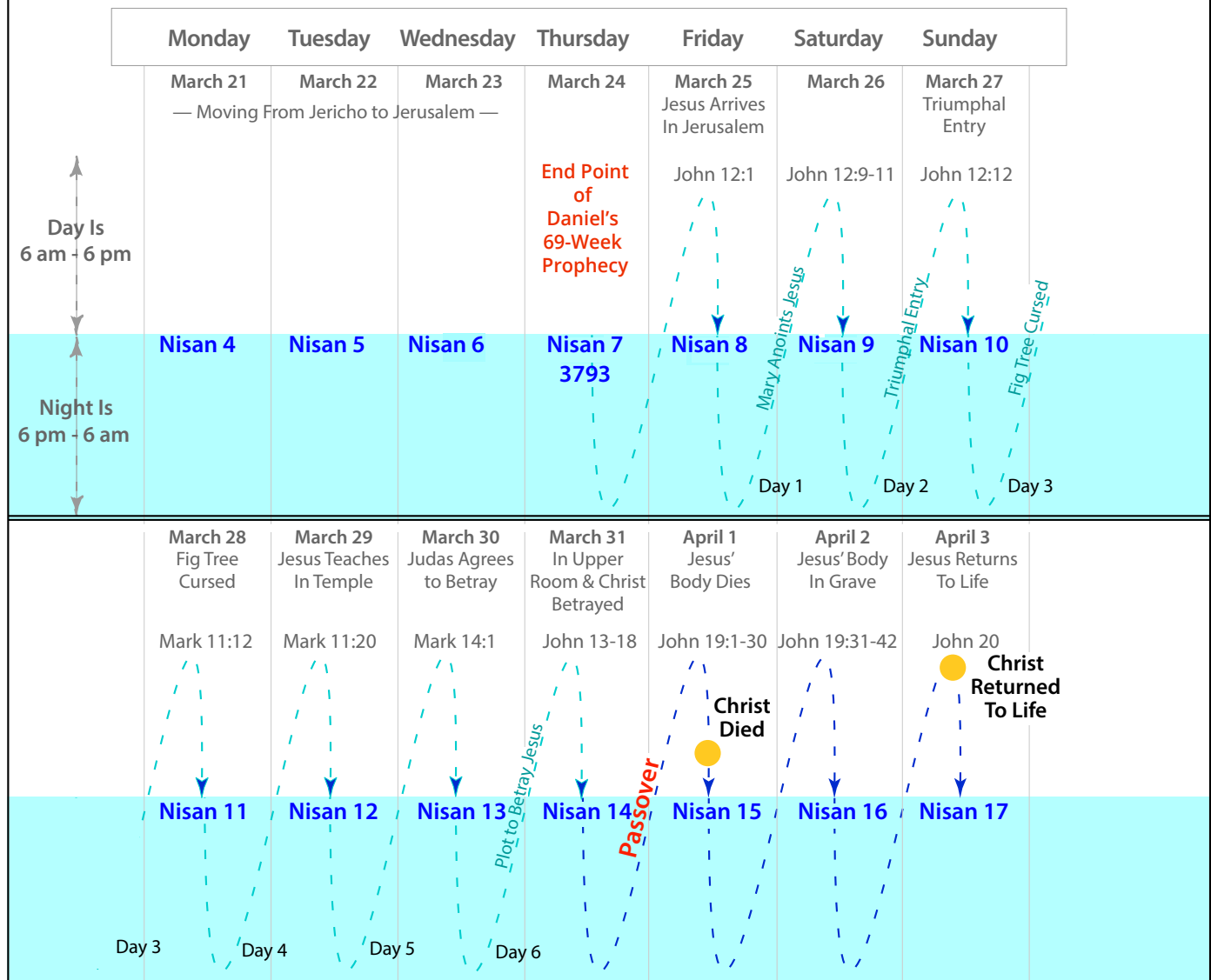


Chief Priests, Scribes, and Elders Confront Jesus

The three gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us that after the disciples and Jesus had the discussion about prayer and faith, they finally arrived in Jerusalem and went to the temple again.

They came again to Jerusalem. And as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests and

Last Week of Jesus' Life



the scribes and the elders came to Him, and began saying to Him, “By what authority are You doing these things, or who gave You this authority to do these things?” Mark 11:27-28 (NASB)

When He entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching . . . Matthew 21:23 (NASB)

Verse 27 adds that as Jesus was walking into the temple, the chief priests, scribes, and elders came to Jesus and asked a question. Since the temple was a very large place, they probably watched Him walking and began to move in His direction. Matthew states it this way,

The Greek word that is translated as “came to” in Mark 11:27 is *erchomai*. But in Matthew 21:23, this same identical word is translated as “entered.” We do not know why the NASB translated the same Greek word differently, but they did. Whatever their reason, the point is that both Matthew and Mark say Jesus came into the temple. Luke skips that fact and just says,

On one of the days while He was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders confronted Him . . .

Luke 20:1 (NASB)

The three gospels make the point that Jesus was teaching while He was walking.

At some point on the temple grounds, the chief priests, scribes, and elders confronted Jesus. The Greek text reveals that there were three groups of people by including the Greek definite article before chief priests, scribes, and elders. That is, the groups were *the* chief priests, *the* scribes, and *the* elders. A. T. Robertson says,

These three classes were in the Sanhedrin. Clearly a large committee of the Sanhedrin including both Sadducees and Pharisees here confront Jesus in a formal attack upon his authority for cleansing the temple and teaching in it.¹

The Sanhedrin Council was composed of Pharisees and Sadducees who were also the leaders of the nation of Israel. The Sadducees were the aristocrats while the Pharisees oversaw the synagogues and were the lay leaders. So, three large groups from the leaders of Israel suddenly confronted Jesus, and why not? On Monday Jesus had cleansed the temple. He had intruded into the temple, into their jurisdiction. Jesus was on their home-turf. We can be confident that they were angry with Him.

When we are told they confronted Jesus, it is important to know that the Greek word for confronted is *ephistemi*. The English translation does not adequately explain what had just happened. The Greek word has the sense of suddenly standing against someone. That is, these members of the Sanhedrin Council had suddenly appeared in front of him or off to His side. Imagine a large group of representatives from the rulers of the nation, which was composed of seventy men is suddenly beside Him. Maybe all the council appeared, but we do not know that.

Sanhedrin Council's Two Questions. Then Luke 20:2 gives us the questions that these men asked,

. . . and they spoke, saying to Him, "Tell us by what authority You are doing these things, or who is the one who gave You this authority?" Luke 20:2 (NASB)

Matthew 21:23 and Mark 11:27 state the same thing, but Mark adds that they repeatedly asked Him these questions. This gives us insight into the tension that existed between Jesus and these three groups of men. They seriously wanted an answer from Christ to their question. We do not know if multiple men asked the questions or if one person repeatedly asked. But it is clear they were eager to get an answer. Both of their questions are fundamentally about authority, just like the introduction to this study.

In the Greek there are two words for authority: *dunamis* and *exousia*. The first word refers to power and the second word has the idea of the right to exercise power.² On Monday Jesus had cleansed the temple and taught the people. On this morning, He had returned and was teaching. From the view of the religious leaders, He did not have their permission to do either one. The temple was under their control and they viewed themselves as the authorized teachers in Israel. So these religious leaders did not believe Jesus had the authority to do anything that He had been doing. So, they asked Him by what authority did He do these things? Did they want Jesus to say that He did not have their permission? Did they want Him to claim authority from heaven?

When we studied John 12:37-43, we learned that some of the religious leaders did believe in Jesus, but most of them did not. That was true. For example, John 3:1 says Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin Council and a teacher of the law (John 3:1 - 10).

"Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." John 3:2 (NASB)

He was one of the few members of the Sanhedrin Council who believed Jesus was sent by God. Nicodemus had come to the conclusion that Jesus had been given authority to

1. A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Mk 11:27.

2 W. E. Vine. Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary. Thomas Nelson. 1978. pp. 45-46.

teach and perform miracles and signs from God the Father. He said, “No one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

But on this occasion, the members of the Sanhedrin Council who confronted Jesus did not believe as Nicodemus did. They rejected Christ’s teachings, miracles, and signs because they did not believe in Christ and in God the Father. Therefore, their questions were not honest. They were not seeking to understand Jesus, but hoping that He would give them a reason to legitimize killing Him.

Yes, they had heard Him say that the origin of His authority came from the Father on multiple occasions. Here are seven examples from the gospels. The first time Jesus spoke of His authority was early in His ministry. This occurred after the wedding in Cana and after Jesus had cleansed the temple. The religious leaders asked Him by what authority did He cleanse the temple. John 2:18-19 states,

The Jews then said to Him, “What sign do You show us as your authority for doing these things?”

Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” John 2:18-19 (NASB)

Jesus replied by telling them in a figuratively manner, that He would die and be resurrected after three days. That is, His resurrection from the dead would be a sign of His authority to cleanse the temple. He had authority to remove evil from the temple. Scripture tells us that the resurrection was performed by the Father, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus (Acts 2:24; Romans 8:11; John 10:17-18).

Second, we are told later in Luke 4:32 that the people in Galilee were amazed at His teaching for He spoke with authority. He spoke with authority because He was doing the Father’s will. Four verses later, He cast a demon out of a man. The people were amazed that He had the authority to

do that. This was the third occasion.

The fourth occasion occurred in Luke 5:20-24 which states that the religious leaders were disturbed that Jesus announced that a man’s sins were forgiven. Jesus responded with this,

“Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins have been forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But, so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,” — He said to the paralytic — “I say to you, get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home.” Luke 5:23-24 (NASB)

He revealed that He had been given authority to forgive sins.

Fifth, John 5:36-43 states that Jesus had told them in strong words that His authority came from God the Father. He said,

“But the testimony which I have is greater than the testimony of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish — the very works that I do — testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me. And the

Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form. You do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent. You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life. I do not receive glory from men; but I know you, that you do not have the love of God in yourselves. I have come in My Father’s name, and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name, you will receive him. John 5:36-43 (NASB)

Jesus’ point was that He was performing the works that the

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Father had given Him to do. They also revealed that He was God and the Messiah. What an incredible message! How did the Father testify about Christ? He did it through the teaching, the miracles and the signs. John 10:25 is a strong statement about the authority of Christ. Jesus said,

I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these testify of Me. John 10:25 (NASB)

The works He performed testified about His identity and His authority. In John 12:37 the Holy Spirit tells us,

But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him. John 12:37 (NASB)

Together, John 10:25 and John 12:37 reveal that the signs Jesus performed spoke of His authority. But these religious leaders rejected Him because they did not believe in Him (John 10:26). Because they were not part of His sheep, they did not believe His works.

John 5:36-43 10:25; 12:37 give us an important biblical principle. The people rejected Christ because they did not believe in God the Father. The second principle is related. They rejected Jesus' authority because they did not believe in Him or the Father. This means those who reject Christ do not believe in or love God the Father. This is an important point in evangelism. When we share the gospel with someone, if they reject Jesus, it is because they do not believe nor love God the Father. Because they reject Him first, they also reject Christ. Then they reject the one sharing the good news about Jesus.

Sixth, John 17:1-2 tells us that the Father gave Jesus the authority over all flesh, including the authority to give them eternal life. In the introduction to the gospel of John we are told,

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name. John 1:12 (NASB)

The truth is that God the Father chose believers before the foundation of the world (John 6:65; Ephesians 1:3-5), the Father draws them (John 6:44), and then Jesus has promised that He will not lose any of them (John 6:37, 39, 40, 44, 47, 54). This is both a fearful and wonderful fact. Jesus is the gate to eternal life. He has the authority to give eternal life, and He has promised to not lose anyone who believes in Him.

Seventh, just before Jesus returned to heaven. He told the eleven disciples,

All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Matthew 28:18-20 (NASB)

This truth was echoed earlier in His ministry (Matthew 11:27; John 3:35; 17:2).

These seven examples, reveal that Jesus was God who took on human flesh. These authorities had to be given to the God-man. Jesus had already told these unbelieving members of the Sanhedrin Council that His authority had been given to Him by God the Father. That was the answer to their questions,

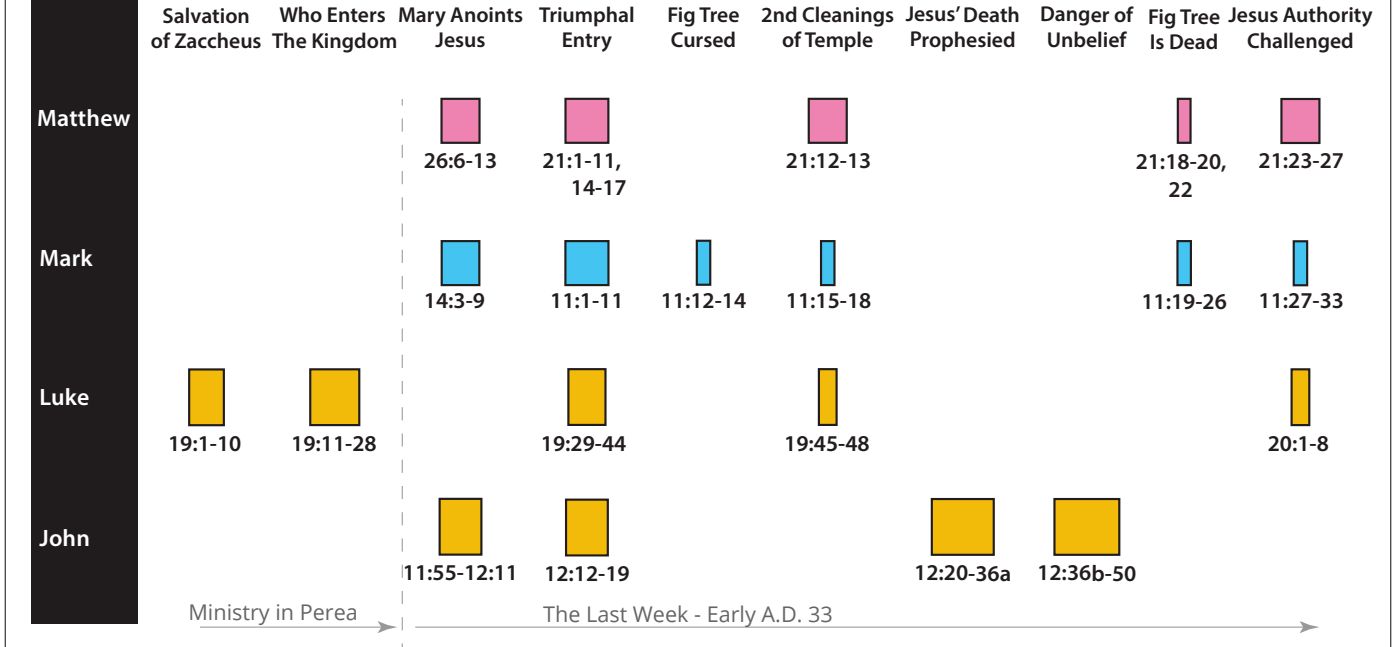
"Tell us by what authority You are doing these things, or who is the one who gave You this authority?" Luke 20:2 (NASB)

This was the same basic question they had asked Jesus when He cleansed the temple the first time. From their perspective Jesus had usurped their authority. They refused to accept that Jesus' authority was not rooted in power. It was rooted in the right to exercise power (*exsouia*), for He was God Himself.

Jesus' Clever Question. Then according to rabbinic custom, it was appropriate for Jesus to ask them a question before answering their question. Mark 11:29-30 captures the most detail for us.

Life and Heart of Jesus

The Last Week - March A.D. 33



And Jesus said to them, “I will ask you one question, and you answer Me, and then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven, or from men? Answer Me.” Mark 11:29-30 (NASB)

“They reasoned among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say, ‘Why did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men,’ all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet.” Luke 20:5-6 (NASB)

Jesus answered with a question because they had heard the answer on other occasions. This was a trap. They wanted Jesus to say something they could use to sentence Him to death. The question was both clever and simple. The trap was a trap for these scheming, wicked religious leaders.

Mark and Luke provide the complete picture of their discussion about how to answer Jesus’ question. Here is Mark and Luke’s record of their response.

They began reasoning among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’ But shall we say, ‘From men?’” — they were afraid of the people, for everyone considered John to have been a real prophet. Mark 11:31-32 (NASB)

These members of the Sanhedrin Council began discussing among themselves how to respond. This large group of men must have gathered together away from Jesus and the crowd. We can imagine someone asking, “What should we say?” They came with two possible answers.

The first answer was that John the Baptist came from heaven. But they realized that Jesus would then ask, “Why did you not believe him?” Here they admitted that they did not believe John because John the Baptist had called them to repent. John had called them snakes.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to

come?” [Matthew 3:7 \(NASB\)](#)

It is clear they did not believe John.

The second answer was that John was from men. Those were the only two choices, either from God or from men. If they said from men, then the people would stone them for they believed John was a prophet from God.

Sanhedrin Council’s Reply. Finally, they decided to claim that could not answer the question.

[Answering Jesus, they said, “We do not know.” Mark 11:33a \(NASB\)](#)

What an interesting reply. If they had said John was from heaven, then they would have looked like they did not want to submit to God. If they had said John was from men, they would be stoned to death. So, they decided to look stupid to the people.

The truth was they did not want to answer biblically. They did not like the biblical answer that John was from heaven. Luke 1:5-25 tells us that John the Baptist was born to Zacharias and Elizabeth. The angel Gabriel had announced his birth. He had come in the spirit and power of the prophet Elijah, who was promised in Malachi 4:5-6 (Matthew 11:10-15; Luke 1:17). John 1:32-34 reveals that God had spoken to him about Jesus. The biblical answer was avoided because they did not like the potential consequences. Sadly, there are some church leaders who ignore Scripture because they do not like the truth and its consequences, do not believe that Scripture is a trustworthy guide, or want to be constrained.

Then Jesus replied with,

[“Nor will I tell you by what authority I do these things.” Mark 11:33b \(NASB\)](#)

His statement is strong. He declared that He would not tell them by what right He is performing these things, for Jesus had already told them. They were not seeking truth. Since Jesus knew their hearts (John 2:24; Luke 11:17), He knew they were wanted to trap Him into saying something that

they could use to crucify Him. They had been plotting for a long time to kill Him. John 5:18 documents the earliest time they were planning to kill Him. That occurred during the second year of His ministry. The most recent time they had planned to kill Him was in John 11:47-53. That was about three months prior, just before Jesus and the disciples traveled into Perea. With His return five days ago, they are now seriously moving in that direction. Tomorrow they will talk to Judas about how to arrest Him in order to kill Him.

Before we leave this study, we should ask ourselves why did the Holy Spirit include this event in Matthew, Mark, and Luke? What is the application for us? First, it reveals the intent of these religious leaders and reminds us that they already wanted to kill Him, the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world, the Good Shepherd, and the One who healed and performed signs, would be killed because He did the Father’s will. The Son had been given authority to perform the will of the Father. As a result, He revealed that He was God.

Second, the Holy Spirit recorded this event to teach us that these religious leaders were not seekers of truth. It teaches us how unbelievers who are not seeking God respond to truth. They rejected Jesus to be God and His claim to perform the works of God because of envy and jealousy (Matthew 27:18; Mark 15:10). They were also afraid of Jesus (Mark 11:18; John 12:19).

The third application is that now we will understand why they will kill Jesus in three days. Yet, Acts 2:22-24 reveals that though God the Father was in total control of the sequence of events, these religious leaders were also guilty of murder.