

Exclusion of the Blind and Lame from the Temple and the Indignation of the Religious Leaders in Matt 21:12-15.

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate why the religious leaders were indignant when Jesus healed the blind and lame in the temple during the cleansing of the temple. A combination of methods is used (backgrounds, exegesis, and inter-textual) to arrive at the conclusion that Matthew perceives the healing of blind and lame in the temple as fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about the return of the glory of God and what it implies in the worship.

Keywords: triumphal entry, exclusion, purity, *Shekinah* glory.

Introduction

Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem has attracted the attention of His opponents. For some time they have been looking for loopholes to accuse Jesus. For sure, they were enraged by His cleansing of the temple. Loss in their flourishing business would be the main reason ("buying and selling" apply to the animal sacrifice as well as money changing businesses). But there is an element which is often overlooked by Bible interpreters when reading Matthew 21: the coming of the blind and lame to Him into the temple and His healing them in the temple. Matthew reports that upon seeing these wonderful things he was doing, they became angry (21:14-15).¹

What lies behind their indignation? Why were the religious leaders angry at Jesus that blind and lame were in the temple? What was Jesus' purpose in his movements and actions, starting from the procession in the triumphal entry until the healing of blind and lame in the temple? This

¹ Unless otherwise stated, this study uses the New King James Version of the Bible.

study looks into the background, meaning and purpose of the entrance and healing of the blind and lame in the temple in Matthew 21:14-15. Our first task is to set the text against the priestly qualifications in Leviticus 21, and David's decree that prohibits entrance of blind and lame into the house in 2 Sam 5:8. Then we move on into how Jews viewed and applied that prohibition in different Jewish writings. This is all done for us to be able to understand and see the purpose of Jesus' actions in the confrontation with the Jewish religious leaders in Matthew 21.

The Text

It appears that Matthew waits until the final week of Jesus' life before his crucifixion to report his ministry in the Judean and Jerusalem ministry.² Up to this point, Matthew is careful to highlight the fulfillment of prophecies in the life and ministry of Jesus (1:22; 2:15,17,23; 8:17; 12:17; 21:4; 26:54-56; 27:9,35). What was said of Him, His actions and claims have attracted the attention of the religious leaders. He is the King of the Jews, said to be worthy of worship (2:2), an act attributed only to God (4:10). He is the promised Messiah (2:6; cf. Micah 5:2). He is the Son of God (3:17) who was preaching that the kingdom of God was at hand (4:17). He consented to be the One who would be coming (11:3), an expression used in the OT for God's breaking into human history (Ps 98:9; Micah 1:3; Zech 5:9; 9:9), pointing to the healing of blind, lame and lepers as signs that indeed He has come (11:5). In relation to temple service and functionality, he claims to be "greater than the temple" (12:6).

Then during His visit and actions in the temple, followed by the reaction of the religious leaders, we witness a dramatic turn of the situation. As a result of the rejection of the Jews, Jesus pronounced the doom of the temple and Jerusalem,³ as His final departure from the temple

² The structure of Matthew clearly shows this: (1) Birth and childhood of Jesus, 1:1-2:23; (2) Preparation for ministry, 3:1-4:11; (3) Galilean ministry, 4:12-15:20; (4) Retirement from public ministry, 15:21-18:35; (5) Peraean ministry, 19:1-20:34; (6) Judean ministry and Passion week, 21:1-27:66; (7) Resurrection and post-resurrection appearances, 28:1-20.

³ Three statements of Jesus are noteworthy: (1) 21:43 "The Kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing fruits of it;" (2) 23:38, "Your house is left to you desolate;" and (3) 23:39, "You shall see Me no more till you say [again], 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

implied (24:1). From there, He went to the Mount of Olives where he was foreseeing the eventual destruction (24:3-).

The three Synoptic Gospels' report on the triumphal entry is substantially the same (Matt 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-40).⁴ However, they differ on the sequence and the events that happen after the triumphal entry:

- Matthew: (1) Triumphal entry, starting from the Mount of Olives (21:1-11);
(2) Cleansing of the temple (21:12-13);
(3) Entrance into and healing of the blind and lame in the temple, and indignation of the religious leaders (21:14-16);
(4) Jesus' retirement to Bethany (21:17);
(5) Cursing of the fig tree and return to the temple, the next day (21:18:23).
- Mark: (1) Triumphal entry, starting from the Mount of Olives (11:1-10);
(2) Retirement to Bethany (11:11);
(3) Cursing of the fig tree (11:12-14);
(4) Cleansing of the temple, and indignation of the religious leaders 11:15-19).
- Luke: (1) Triumphal entry, starting from the Mount of Olives (19:28-40);
(2) Weeping over Jerusalem (11:44-44);
(3) Cleansing of the temple and indignation of the religious leaders (19:45-48).

A few observations should be made: (1) all Synoptics have not recorded any earlier visit by Jesus to Jerusalem and to the temple, since He began His ministry;⁵ (2) all Synoptics affirm that the triumphal entry starts from the Mount of Olives, East of Jerusalem; (3) all Synoptics affirm

⁴ John reports only the triumphal entry with the religious leaders' admission that the world has gone after Jesus (12:12-19).

⁵ This is not to say that Jesus has not visited Jerusalem and the temple previously (cf. John 2:13; 5:1-47; 7:7,14; 10:22,23; 12:12-19).

that Jesus cleansed the temple; but (4) only Matthew reports the entrance into and healing of the blind and the lame in the temple.

Matthew 21:12-15 reads,

12 Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. 13 And He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a ‘den of thieves.’

14 Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. 15 But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ they were indignant.

The word *hieron* (“temple”) is used four times in this passage (twice in v. 12, once in v. 14, and once in v. 15), bringing the total into five times in the same chapter of the Gospel of Matthew.⁶ It refers to different quarters in the temple. The Greek English Concordance highlights those different uses (1) “temple,” (2) “temple area” or “temple courts,” as its following translation show:⁷

21:12 Jesus entered the *temple area* (*eis tō hieron*) and drove out all who were buying

21:12 [Jesus] drove out all who were buying and selling there [i.e. *en tō hierō* - *temple area*]

21:14 The blind and the lame came to him and the *temple* (*en tō hierō*), and he healed

21:15 things he did and the children shouting in the *temple area* (*en tō hierō*)

⁶ In total, the word is used elsewhere (4:4 [temple]; 12:5 [temple]; 12:6 [temple]; 24:1 [temple]; 26:55 [temple courts], bring the total into eleven times in the Gospel.

⁷ John R. Kohlenberger III, Edward W. Goodrick and James A. Swanson, *The Greek English Concordance to the New Testament with the New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), s.v. “*hieron*.”

21:23 Jesus entered the *temple courts* (*eis tō hieron*) and, while he was teaching. . .

In order for us to know what the “temple” means and where the exact location of the blind and lame was when they were healed, we need to enlarge our study of the uses of *hieron* in the NT.

- (1) It is used when the reference is to the whole complex. The gentiles were allowed to be in the outer court (the court of the gentiles) and not beyond.⁸
- (2) It is used for the court of women, where Anna prayed (Luke 2:37, and Jesus observed the poor widow putting her offerings (Mark 12:41ff). Evidence from the NT shows that lame may come up to this point. In Acts 3:2, the lame was laid daily at the gate called Beautiful, the “high inner gate,” which “leads from the court of women into inner court.”⁹
- (3) It is used for the inner court, with the altar and the temple proper. This was for the men (court of Israelites) and for the priests. Men came to worship and brought their offerings and sacrifices to the altar (Mat 5:23,24; Acts 21:26).
- (4) It is used for the temple proper (*naos*), where only priests could enter (Luke 1:9). But men in the inner court could “fix his gaze on the costly curtain above the temple door.”¹⁰

From the foregoing study, it is likely that the business of buying and selling was going on in the court of gentiles. The blind and lame came

⁸ See *Ant.* 15.417, where Josephus mentions the low dividing wall (3 cubits high) upon which stood pillars of equivalent intervals with inscription in Greek and Roman letters, forbidding any foreigner to go in under pain of death. See also Philo, *Leg. Ad Gaium* 212. Claremont-Ganneau, in 1871, discovered the warning inscription, which reads, “No man of another nation to enter within the fence and enclosure round the temple. And whoever is caught will have himself to blame that his death ensues.” (C. K. Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*, rev.ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1956; 1987), 53).

⁹ Gottlob Schrenk, “to *hieron*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:236. Schrenk’s information is Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 5.204, “now the sizes of the other gates were equal one to another; but that over the Corinthian gate, which opened on the east opposite the gate of the holy house itself, was much larger).

¹⁰ Schrenk, 3:230-247.

from the court of gentiles (outer court) or likely the court of women, traversed the Beautiful Gate, and got into the “temple,” i.e. the inner court (court of Israelites) to be healed by Jesus.

One more observations is in order. In cleansing the temple, Jesus quoted from Isa 56:7, as He reacted upon seeing the business in the temple: it is a “house of prayer,” not a “den of thieves.” But Isaiah 56:7 goes on to state that the temple is a “house of prayer for all nations.” Even though Jesus did not explicitly quote that phrase, His immediate following action of approving the entrance and healing the blind and the lame in the temple (21:14) implies it. The temple is the house of prayer for all. There will be no discrimination to enter it to worship God.

Blind and Lame Prohibited from Serving in the Temple

A study of Thomas Hentrich looks into the religious implications of being blind and lame in Ancient Israel, especially questions concerning their ritual purity, which is the subject of Lev 21, 16-23 and is referred to as well in 2 Sam 5, 6-8.¹¹

16 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 17 “Speak to Aaron, saying, ‘No man of your descendants in succeeding generations, who has any defect, may approach to offer the bread of His God. 18 For any man who has a defect shall not approach: a man blind or lame, who has marred face or any limb too long, 19 a man who has a broken foot or broken hand, 20 or is a hunchback or a dwarf, or a man who has a defect in his eye, or eczema or scab, or is a eunuch. 21 No man of the descendants of Aaron the priest, who has a defect, shall come near to offer the offerings made by fire to the Lord. He has a defect; he shall not come near to offer the bread of His God. 22 He may eat the bred of his God, both the most holy and the holy; 23 only he has not go near the veil or approach the altar, because he has a defect, lest he profane My sanctuaries; for I the Lord sanctify them (Lev 21:16-23).

The instruction (only found here in the OT) is given for priestly requirements to serve in the temple. It is obvious that the prohibition of

¹¹ Thomas Hentrich, “The ‘Lame’ in Lev 21, 17-23 and 2 Sam 5, 6-8,” accessed November 03, 2014, <https://www.academia.edu>.

those who have defect (blind and lame for the purpose of our study) from serving as priest has to do with holiness and purity of the Lord and His temple. Blindness and lameness constituted a ritual (cultic) blemish.¹² The priests are the representatives of the Lord in His temple. Since the Lord (and His temple) is holy and pure, anyone who serves Him must be whole, free from physical defects. Anyone who has one of the listed defects profanes (Greek *bebēloō*, “to pollute,” “to make common,” “to defile”) the temple (Lev 21:23). John E. Hartley states, “any bodily defect renders a person imperfect, unfit to function as priest. . . The wholeness of the priest, just like the wholeness of an animal acceptable for sacrifice corresponds to and bears witness to the holiness of the sanctuary and the holiness of God.”¹³ Jacob Milgrom has advanced the idea that the list of blemishes are an arbitrary collection to match animal blemishes for sacrifices, hence the absence of certain human blemishes like deafness or muteness, these being not easily detectable in animals.¹⁴ However, blemish excludes priests from serving but not from the priestly share of food (Lev 21:22; see also Lev 2:3,10; 6:12-18, 22; 7:1,6; 7:31-34; 24:8-9; Num 18:26).

While the instruction in Leviticus 21 is given to list the priestly requirements for temple service, its restriction for cultic functionality has been seen as applying also to any Israelites in general. Effectively, Leviticus 21:18 says “for **any man** who has a defect shall not approach,” (also v.23) and such a statement in the same passage seems to lend support to that conclusion. Hentrich affirms that “physically disabled people had no business whatsoever to even enter the temple.”¹⁵ If this is true, then, the same principles of holiness and purity for the unblemished priests who served and offered unblemished sacrifices to the holy God in his holy temple were meant to apply to any worshipper. Any blemish from the offerer and the offering was not acceptable. Blindness and lameness

¹² See “blindness,” in *The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 235.

¹³ John E. Harley, *Leviticus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1992), 349.

¹⁴ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1837.

¹⁵ Hentrich, 19. The same opinion is held by Daniel Marguerat, *Actes des Apotres (1-12)* (France: Labor et Fides, 2007), 117; Bueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, pp. 241; quoted in Ronald F. Youngblood, “1,2 Samuel,” in *Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 856.

constituting a ritual (cultic) blemish, their exclusion stemmed from fear of polluting the house of the Lord.¹⁶

Blind and Lame Prohibited from Entering the House

At a cursory reading, David's decree that "the blind and the lame shall not come into the house" in 2 Samuel 5:8 seems to be unrelated to the prohibition of the blind and lame from serving in the priesthood in Leviticus 21. As a matter of fact, the text says that "blind and lame" were "hated by David's soul" (2 Sam 5:8), and that hatred seemed to be the reason for their prohibition from entering the house, and not any other reason that may have been deduced from the Levitical instruction.

The context is about David's capture of Jerusalem. The passage of 2 Samuel 5:6-8 (TEV) reads:

6 The time came when King David and his men set out to attack Jerusalem. The Jebusites, who lived there, thought that David would not be able to conquer the city, and so they said to him, "You will never get in here; even the blind and the crippled could keep you out." 7 (But David did capture their fortress of Zion, and it became known as 'David's City.') 8 That day David said to his men, 'Does anybody here hate the Jebusites as much as I do? Enough to kill them? Then go up through the water tunnel and attack those poor blind cripples.' (That is why it is said, 'The blind and the crippled cannot enter the Lord's house.')

According to Josephus, the Jebusites were so confident of the strength of their wall that they placed blind and lame upon the wall to defend the city, obviously in contempt of David.¹⁷ Unfortunately, Josephus makes no mention or comment of "the blind and lame shall not come into the house."

It is clear that for David, it is the Jebusites who were the blind and lame. He identified them as such, and declared them to be rooted out. As

¹⁶ Interpreting blindness and lameness as divine punishment (Deut 28:28; John 9:2) may have contributed to the thought of excluding the blind and lame from the temple.

¹⁷ *Antiquities*, 7.61.

Keil and Delitzsch note, “‘blind and lame’ has the general signification of ‘repulsive persons,’ with whom one does not wish to have anything to do.”¹⁸ David, under provocation, decreed to exclude the blind and lame from the house. It “eventually gave rise to an epigram: ‘the blind and lame’ will not enter the palace [house].”¹⁹ But it could be that, in David’s mind, it was the Jebusites who were blind and lame who were barred from associating with him. In all likelihood, David did not exclude blind and lame from his house. His eventual welcome to the lame Mephibosheth into his royal palace (2 Sam 9:13) provides evidence for this.

But the question remains unanswered: why the exclusion of the blind and lame from the temple? Bruce C. Birch affirms, “we do not know of such regulation although disabled persons could not become priests (Lev 21:18).”²⁰ Joel O. Lewis disagrees, stating, “David’s challenge to his men later became the explanation for refusing to allow the lame and blind in the temple (v.8 and Lev 21:18).”²¹ Hentrich, in his turn, argues that the reason for the prohibition of blind and lame from the temple was not their opposition to David during the fall of Jerusalem (these were Jebusites), but the blind and lame’s perceived impurity, thus, following Lev 21:18.²²

The Hebrew *bayit* is used in the OT for dwelling (palace, 2 Chr 9:11, or god’s house/temple, 2 Kings 11:10,11,13), house/place to stay (Ex 10:6), or household/family (Gen 7:1). In the LXX, the word as used in 2 Samuel 5:8 is translated into *oikon tou kuriou*, “house of the Lord.” This is significant in that the LXX translators understood it as the temple, thus, prohibiting the blind and lame from entering the temple. To stress it further, LXX translation and interpretation may reflect the way Jewish people thought about the blind and lame. Hentrich’s observation is to the point:

¹⁸ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Old Testament Commentaries*, vol. 2, *Judges 6:33-Ezra* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 365.

¹⁹ Youngblood, 856.

²⁰ Bruce C. Birch, “The First and Second Books of Samuel,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. II (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 1237.

²¹ Joel O. Lewis, *Laymans’ Bible Book Commentary*, vol. 5, *1 and 2 Samuel, 1 Chronicles* (Nashville: Broadman, 1980), 85.

²² Hentrich, 13.

Even though the text says nothing about their impurity, this phrase indicates that David himself would have ordered their expulsion from the temple on personal grounds that are founded in their presumed opposition to him.

More likely though, disabled people seemed to have played a more active role in the Jebusite cult center prior to the capture by David, but are considered impure by Israelite standards. For this reason, they are subsequently excluded from the temple once it was built shortly after David's reign.²³

As a way of summary, Leviticus 21 prohibits blind and lame priests from serving in the temple. In spite of v. 18, there is no hard evidence from the OT writings and time that this exclusion has been understood to include all Israelites. However, the translation of *bayit* into "house of the Lord" as the etiology of the epigram "the blind and lame shall not enter the house" in 2 Samuel 5:8, seems to indicate that around the time of the LXX translation in the third century, the exclusion of the blind and lame from the temple was in effect, or at least expected.²⁴ The motif of their exclusion seemed to be their perceived impurity which was associated with their disability.²⁵ Jewish writings around the NT time support that idea. At this junction, we need to turn to these writings. What they say in relation to the subject may elucidate the matter.

Exclusion of Blind and Lame in the Jewish Writings

Our first evidence from Jewish writings relating to the exclusion of blind and lame from the temple is found in the Mishnah. The Mishnah focuses on the holiness of Israel and its land, which is clearly derived from the holiness of God.²⁶ Everett Ferguson's summary is helpful:

²³ Hentrich, 19.

²⁴ For the same idea that the Levitical regulation was extended in time to exclude all the blind and lame, see "The Godman: The Astonishing Teaching of Jesus on Spirituality," accessed January 21, 2014, www.daretoventure.org/venture/identity_files/52TheChurchStudyHelps-pdf.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The Mishnaic translation used in this paper is that of Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1933; repr. 2013).

[Mishnah is] concerned, in order, with the holiness of the land of Israel, the holiness of time (proper conduct on holy days), the holiness of family life (with special reference to the transfer of women from the father's house to the husband's), the sanctification of property (the stable conduct of civil life), the holy place (stable conduct of the cult), and the bounds of holiness (purity in an unholy world). The Mishnah thus focuses on the sanctification of Israel, distinguishing her from the world and establishing order and stability.²⁷

The Mishnaic passage about the exclusion of blind and lame from the temple is found in *Hagigah* 1.1:

All are subject to the command to appear [before the Lord] excepting a deaf-mute, an imbecile, a child, one of doubtful sex, one of double sex, women, slaves that are not been freed, a man that is lame or blind or sick or aged, and one that cannot go up [to Jerusalem] on his feet.

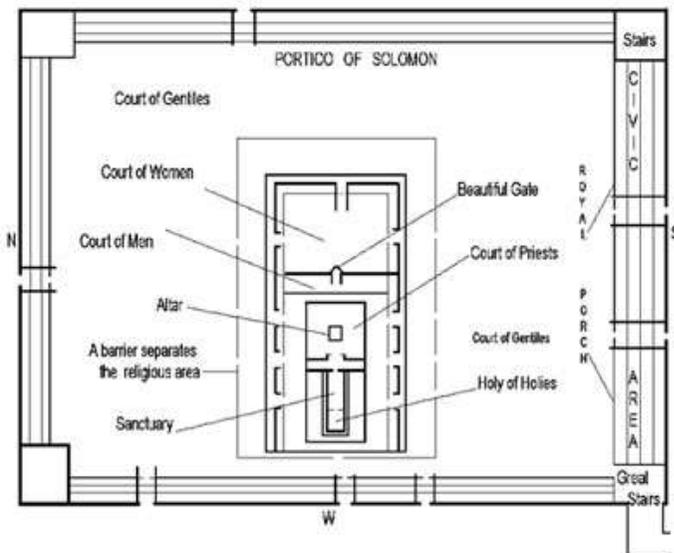


Figure 1. Map of the Second Temple

²⁷ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 493.

The command to appear before the Lord is taken from Exodus 23:14-17 and Deuteronomy 16:16,17. Two things are to be noted in relation with the command “to appear before the Lord.” (1) It requires that an Israelite who came during these feasts bring offerings and/or sacrifice as the Deuteronomic text instructs; (2) it implies that those who came could have a view from their court both the offering of their sacrifices being performed by the priest and the front face of the sanctuary (Gr. *naos*).²⁸ The wall and chambers between the Court of women and the Court of men (Israelites) prevented anyone in the Court of women from having that privilege.



Figure 2. View of the Second Temple

It is clear from the Mishnaic text quoted above that while others are required to go to the temple in fulfillment of the command of Exodus 23:14-17 and Deuteronomy 16:16,17, blemished people like lame and blind cannot appear before the Lord.²⁹ No mishnaic explanation is given as the reason why they were excluded because of their defects.

²⁸ See map and image of the temple in Jesus' time.

²⁹ Marguerat, 117, fn 8, cites j. *Shabbat* 6,8 as legitimizing and legislating the exclusion of lame.

This sketchy mishnaic record on the exclusion of blind and lame from the temple is greatly supplemented by the Qumran writings.³⁰ The community of Qumran concluded that the temple of Jerusalem and its worship, defiled by its priests, were no longer valid, and God no longer dwelt there.³¹ Now, they saw themselves as the true Israel, the “men of holiness.”³² This is not simply because they are holy but the community itself is regarded as the temple of God, His dwelling place.³³ The community is a “holy house for Israel and the foundation of the holy of holies for Aaron, . . . the most holy dwelling [*ma'on*] for Aaron.”³⁴ The city is the “centre of which I dwell, because I, YAWH, dwell in the midst of the children of Israel for ever and always.”³⁵ As the “temple”³⁶ of God, a “high level of purity” must be required and maintained in order to enjoy God’s presence.³⁷

There is no wonder that the OT concept of holiness and purity found its highest expression in the Qumran community. The exclusion of blind and lame from the community (thus the temple) is clearly stated.³⁸

The underlying reason for the exclusion is God’s holy presence in the midst of His people. By the time the Temple Scroll was written, blindness was viewed as impurity.³⁹ Blind defiles the dwelling of God.

³⁰ The Qumran texts used in this paper, unless otherwise stated, is that of Florentino Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

³¹ CD V.6,7; 1 QS V.19,20.

³² 1QS VIII.17.

³³ For an elaborate exposition of the concept that Qumran community itself was the temple of God, see Michael Newton, *The Concepts of Purity at Qumran and in the Letters of Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 36-49; see also Francis Schmidt, *La Pensee du Temple de Jerusalem a Qumran* (n.p.: Editions du Seuil, 1994).

³⁴ 1QS VIII.5-9. The word *ma'on* (“dwelling place”) is used in Psalm 26:8 and 2 Chronicles 36:15 to refer to the temple as the dwelling place of God.

³⁵ 11Q19 XLV.13,14.

³⁶ 4QMMT 51.

³⁷ Newton, 36,49.

³⁸ For more information about the exclusion of the disabled persons from the Qumran community, see Lawrence H. Schiffman, “Exclusion From The Sanctuary And The City Of The Sanctuary In The Temple Scroll,” accessed January 21, kb.osu/dspace/bitstream/handle/1811/58707/HAR_v9_301.pdf; see also “The Blemish Persons in the Temple Scroll,” accessed January 21, 2015, irs.ub.rug.nl/albi/4669017ba060

³⁹ “Blindness,” 235. People who were blind and lame could not join the community but members who became blind and lame could remain (see John J. Pilch,

Temple Scroll says, “No blind person shall enter it throughout his whole life; he shall not defile the city in the centre of which I dwell because I, YHWH, dwell in the midst of the children of Israel for ever and always.”⁴⁰ Elsewhere, it is said that the exclusion is required because of the presence of the angels.⁴¹

Interestingly, Qumran writings clearly associates blindness with perceived impurity. Their impurity is due to the fact that they cannot see. And since they cannot see, they cannot keep themselves from uncleanness and they cannot apply the purity rules in the temple. Halakhic Letter explains:

Because the sons of Israel ought to keep themselves from all uncleanness of the male and be respectful towards the temple. And also concerning the blind who cannot see: they should keep themselves from all uncleanness, and they do not see the uncleanness of the sin-offering. And also concerning the deaf who do not hear the law or the regulations concerning purity and do not hear the laws of Israel; for whoever neither sees nor hears, does not know how to apply (them); but these are approaching the purity of the temple.⁴²

In another place, both lameness and blindness are associated with human uncleanness:

No man smitten with any human uncleanness shall enter the assembly of God; no man smitten with any of them shall be confirmed in his office in the congregation. No man smitten in his flesh, or paralysed in his feet or hands, or lame, or blind, or deaf, or dumb, or smitten in his flesh with a visible blemish; no old or tottery man unable to stay still in the midst of the congregation;

“Blindness,” *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, ed. Katharine Doob Saknfeld [Nashville: Abingdon, 2006], 480).

⁴⁰ 11Q19 XLV.13,14. Blind and lame are also excluded from military camp as the soldiers get ready for war. The same reason is given: the angels are present to fight alongside the soldiers (1QM VII.4,5).

⁴¹ 1QSa II.3-9. Cf. Paul’s mention of the presence of angels in the worship in 1 Corinthians 11:10.

⁴² 4QMMT 51-57.

none of these shall come to hold office among the congregation of the mean of renown, for the Angels of Holiness are [with] their [congregation].⁴³

As a way of summary, we may say that Jewish writings around the time of the NT demonstrate that the blind and lame were excluded from the temple. Such exclusion grew out of their understanding and interpretation of OT texts, namely Leviticus 21:16-23 and 2 Samuel 5:8. David Nienhuis aptly says “Jews of Jesus’ day would know the blind and lame people were not allowed into the temple.”⁴⁴

Entrance and Healing of Blind and Lame in the Temple in Matthew 21

With the foregoing investigations in mind, we may now deal with Jesus’ confrontation with the religious leaders in Matthew 21 and understand their reaction when the blind and the lame came into the temple and were healed by Jesus there.

The healing of the lame in Acts 3 gives us a picture of what looked like for a disabled person to enter the temple. He was laid daily at Beautiful Gate “to ask alms from those who entered the temple” (v.2). This gives us an idea that the Beautiful Gate is the furthest a blind could go.⁴⁵ It was only when he was healed that he entered into the temple, i.e court of men (of Israel), with Peter and John as Acts 3:8 reports. We note that the religious leaders did not react negatively because there was no infraction committed by Peter and John: the lame was healed at the Beautiful Gate. His status of being whole gave him the right to fully enter the temple. Acts 4:2 tells why they laid hands on the apostles: they were “greatly disturbed that they [Peter and John] taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.”

⁴³ 1QSa II.3-9 .

⁴⁴ David Nienhuis, “The Confrontation in Jerusalem: Matthew 21:1-23:39,” accessed January 21, 2015, blog.spu.edu/lectio/the-confrontation-in-Jerusalem/

⁴⁵ Some commentators restricted the blind and lame to the court of the gentiles (*Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33b [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995], 601; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 1 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 770.

The scene is different in Matthew 21:14. The blind and lame, likely from the Beautiful Gate, entered into the temple, to come to Jesus. And there, He healed them. Already the religious leaders were not happy with Jesus because of the cleansing of the temple and the events preceding it. Now the thing that was not done was happening: the blind and lame who were previously excluded, came in, and Jesus approved it. He went further: He healed them. For the religious leaders, the temple has been defiled by the entrance of those who did not have the right to enter it.⁴⁶ Their cups overflowed. They were full of indignation (Mat 21:15c). The condemnation of Jesus was just steps away.

But there is more to Jesus's action to approve the entrance of the blind and lame into an area where they were forbidden, and His healing of them, irrespective of the indignation of the religious leaders. These implications are worth noting.

Implications

The following implications are somewhat interrelated.

Messianic Age

Matthew draws the attention of his readers to see that the procession from the Mount of Olives and the riding on a donkey, the triumphal entry to Jerusalem, the cleansing of the temple, and the healing of blind and lame were all signs of messianic age, the dawning of God's kingdom, as fulfillment of OT prophecies (Matt 21:4). Even if Matthew mentions Jesus on Mount of Olives only during the final week of His life, the fact that he mentions three times Jesus' activities there is striking (Matt 21:3; 24:3; 26:30). His start of the procession from the Mount of Olives must be linked with His ascension from and second return on the same mountain (Acts 1:11) as Zechariah has prophesied in the OT (Zech 14:4). His riding on a donkey was a matter of deliberate choice and of careful planning to show the kingly fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9.⁴⁷ Beside associating his kingly posture with riding a donkey, people proclaimed

⁴⁶ We see the seriousness of the matter when we read Luke's report of the Jews who arrested Paul because they believed he brought Greeks into the temple to defile it (Acts 21:27-29).

⁴⁷ France, 774.

Him as the Son of David, a title with an explicit messianic connotation.⁴⁸ The Psalmist's utterance, "blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Ps 118:26) is now fulfilled.

But the dawning of God's kingdom is also seen in the carrying out of His mission as He himself uttered it in Luke 4:18-19 (cf. Isa 61:1,2), of which healing the blind and lame is an integral part. Now the blind and lame were able healed in the temple. "Their entering it [the temple] now for healing would have been a powerful sign that God's kingdom was indeed at hand."⁴⁹

Return of God's Glory in the Temple

The Mount of Olives' motif in Matthew is not only linked with the prophecies of Zechariah as we have seen. It is likely that Matthew has also in mind Ezekiel's prophecies in relation to the glory of God, its departure from the temple to the Mount of Olives and its return from the Mount of Olives to the temple.

Ezekiel the prophet saw and described that departure and return. The glory of the Lord departed from the temple, went out, and stood on the east gate, before going up to and standing on the mountain, east side of the city, i.e. Mount of Olives (10:3-4, 18,19; 11:22,23).⁵⁰ Ezekiel 43:1-4 describes how the same glory would come back from the way of the east (undoubtedly Mountain of Olives) and came into the (post-babylonian captivity) temple by way of the gate which faces toward the east (43:1-4). This all fits Jesus' entry into the temple from the eastern Mountain (Olives) through the eastern gate as the logical route of the procession would dictate.

But to understand fully that return from the eastern Mountain through the eastern gate, we need to take a look at another OT prophecy,

⁴⁸ Cf. 2 Samuel 16:2 where donkey was given to the King David to ride on.

⁴⁹ Nienhuis, "Confrontation."

⁵⁰ According to post-biblical Jewish sources, referring to Ezekiel's vision of the departure of God's glory, i.e. the *Shekinah*, "it [*Shekinah*] waited on the Mount of Olives for three and a half years, hoping that Israel might repent, then ascended to heaven from the Mount (Lam. Rab. Proem 25)" (Joel B. Green, "Mount of Olives," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld [Nashville: Abingdon, 2009], 4:158).

that of Haggai. The statement of Haggai 2:3 is very revealing on the status of the temple that was being rebuilt after the Babylonian captivity. “Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? In comparison with it, is this not in your eyes as nothing?” There was no ark of covenant in the second temple. The Jewish tradition states that Jeremiah hid the Ark in a cave in Mt. Nebo before the Babylonian invasion, and that its location would not be revealed until God was ready for it to be found (2 Macc. 2:4-8). There was no manifestation of the glory in it.⁵¹

But God promised that His glory would return in the temple. And its glory would be greater than that of the first temple.⁵² The *Shekinah*, as Ezechiel prophesied, and Haggai anticipated, would be back.⁵³ The promise has found its fulfillment approximately 500 years later.⁵⁴ God in person was in the temple.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Ellen White writes,

“But the 2nd temple had not equaled the 1st in magnificence; nor was it hallowed by those visible tokens of the divine presence which pertained to the first temple. . . No cloud of glory was seen to fill the newly erected sanctuary . . . The *Shekinah* no longer abode between the cherubim in the most holy place; the ark, the mercy seat, and the table of the testimony were not to be found therein” (Ellen G. White, *Great Controversy*, 88).

⁵² “Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry *land*; And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, . . . The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the LORD of hosts: and in this place will I give peace, saith the LORD of hosts.” (Hag 2:6-9, KJV).

⁵³ The work *Shekinah* is not used in the Bible but the concept is clearly found there. The *Shekinah* describes the visible presence of God in His sanctuary/temple (see Ex 25:22; 40:34-38; 2 Sam 6:2; Isa 37:16).

⁵⁴ D. Moody explains, “the word [*Shekinah*] is . . . reflected in the NT, especially in the belief that God came to dwell in the flesh of Jesus Christ.” (“*Shekinah*,” in *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G. A. Buttrick [New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1962], 4:317). The association of the *Shekinah* with Christ is especially found in the Gospel of John (1:14; 2:1-11; 4:46-54; 5:2-9; 6:4-13; 9:1-7; 11:1-14; 17:1-26), but also in other NT writings, such as 2 Peter 1:17.

⁵⁵ “For centuries the Jews had vainly endeavored to show wherein the promise of God given by Haggai, had been fulfilled. . . The 2nd temple was not honored with the cloud of Jehovah’s glory, but with the living presence of One in whom dwelt the fullness of the Godhead bodily, - who was God himself manifest in the flesh. The “Desire of all nations” had indeed come to his temple when the Man of Nazareth taught and healed in the sacred courts.” (White, *GC*, 88).

This picture is vividly painted in Matthew. Matthew insinuates that here comes the fulfillment of the OT prophecy. For Matthew, the procession from the Mount of Olives points to the entrance (return) of God's glory (i.e. Jesus) to the temple. Matthew's record is building up toward that final week of Jesus' life, which starts with the procession from the Mount of Olives, in the East, (Matt 21:1); 21:5, "Your king is coming to you." 21:9, "Hosanna to the Son of David! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.'" Then there is the entrance through the eastern gate of the temple. In God's presence, the temple must recover its holiness: it was cleansed (21:12). Finally the entrance of the blind and lame into the temple, and their healing to make them fit for worship and appearance before God (21:14).

The Jewish rejection of Jesus made the designation of the temple as "My house" [Isa 56:7; Matt 21:13] turn into "Your house" (Matt 23:38), and not only that, "Your house is left to you desolate." "Christ himself was the Lord of the temple; when He should leave it, its glory would depart."⁵⁶ When Jesus passed out from the temple's eastern gate, the glory had forever departed from the temple.⁵⁷ "The holy Shekinah, in departing from the first temple, had stood upon the eastern mountain [recall Ez 11:23], as if loath to forsake the chosen city; so Christ stood upon Olivet, with earning heart overlooking Jerusalem."⁵⁸

From the Mount of Olives, he announces the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem. Even if Matthew does not report the Ascension of Jesus from the Mount of Olives (see Luke 24:50,51; Acts 1:11,12), there is no doubt that he was familiar with another Zechariah's prophecy about the descent of the city in which God dwells upon the same mountain (Zechariah 14:14; cf. Rev 21:3).

The All-Inclusive Character of Worship and Appearance before God

The message of Matthew 21:15 is that one is made fit to worship God and to appear before Him in His temple. In the messianic age, the blind and the lame would be recipients of God's favor. "By healing the

⁵⁶ Ellen White, quoted in *SDABC*, 4:1139.

⁵⁷ Ellen White, *GC*, 88.

⁵⁸ Ellen White, *DA*, 829.

lame in the temple, Jesus restored these excluded ones to full participation in the worship community (Matthew 21:14).”⁵⁹ And Michael J. Wilkins concurs,

As Jesus heals the blind and the lame, he shows his authority to create purity in all those desiring to worship God, demonstrating that as the One who is greater than the temple (12:6), he fulfills the Old Testament prescriptions for cleansing that the temple practices required to come into the presence of God.⁶⁰

Such inclusion is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:8, “Behold I will bring them from the ends of the earth, among them the blind and the lame.” The entrance of the blind and lame into and their healing in the temple was a tangible demonstration of Jesus’ words: the temple is the house of prayer of all nations (Matt 21:13). It is all-inclusive. Besides, their healing was not merely physical. It carries a clear message of renewal and restoration. Their full membership in the people of God is reconstituted and restored.⁶¹

Having in mind the image of appearance before God when there will be no more dividing that hinders the worshiper from being in his presence, the author of Hebrews admonishes, “let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith.” (Heb 10:21). But the religious leaders did not see it that way. For them, the prohibition of blind and lame from the temple is still maintained to protect its holiness and purity. The blame was on Jesus who prompted them to come into the temple, thus defiling it. He, accordingly, approved that defilement. Moreover, Jesus healed them. But, instead of praising God for His mighty deeds and mercy, they were indignant at Jesus, and looked for ways to get rid of Him.

⁵⁹ “Lame, Lameness,” *Holman Bible Dictionary*, ed. Trent C. Butler (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1991).

⁶⁰ Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, NIV Application Commentary, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 692.

⁶¹ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 192.

Conclusion

This study attempted to answer the question why were the religious leaders were indignant. The entrance into and healing of blind and lame in the temple plays an important part in the demonstration of the dawning of the Messianic age and the return of God's glory in the temple. Jesus asserted Himself as the promised Messiah. He acted as God's glory returning to the temple from the Eastern mountain. God's presence requires the holiness and purity of the temple. It must be cleansed. It is a house of prayer, and more than that, a house of prayer for all nations. There will be no discrimination to appear before the Lord in worship. He himself takes to make the worshiper fit for worship. His subsequent action in approving the entrance of and healing the blind and lame was a step toward that all-inclusiveness of God's worship. His death on the cross is for the purification and inclusion for all who come to Him, where "there is neither Jew no Greek, there is neither male nor female" (Gal 3:28). He has "broken down the middle war of separation." (Eph 2:14). The blind and lame, though excluded, are healed and restored in the people of God. Now they find their place in His presence and worship.