

Matthew: 21:23–27

From Catena Aurea:

23. And when he was come into the temple, the Chief Priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching, and said, By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?

24. And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things.

25. The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him?

26. But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet.

27. And they answered Jesus, and said, We cannot tell. And he said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things.

CHRYSOSTOM. Forasmuch as they could not detract from His miracles, they bring matter of blame from His forbidding to sell in the Temple. As though they had said, Hast Thou assumed the seat of authority? Hast Thou been anointed Priest, that Thou exertest this power?

JEROME. Or in these words they urge the same cavil as above, when they said, He casteth out demons through Beelzebub the Prince of the demons. (Mat. 12:24.) For when they say, By what authority doest thou these things? they doubt concerning the power of God, and would have it understood that the things He does are of the Devil. But when they add, Who gave thee this authority? they most clearly deny the Son of God, whom they suppose to work miracles, not by His own, but by others' strength. The Lord could have confuted the calumny of His tempters by a simple answer, but He put a question to them of such skilful contrivance, that they must be condemned either by their silence or their knowledge; Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one question.

AUGUSTINE. (in Joan. Tr. v. 4.) John received his authority to baptize from Him, whom he afterwards baptized; and that baptism which was committed to him is here called the baptism of John. He alone received such a gift; no righteous man before or after him was entrusted with a baptism to be called from

himself. For John came to baptize in the water of repentance, to prepare the way for the Lord, not to give inward cleansing, which mere man cannot do.

JEROME. What the Priests revolved in their malice is shewn when he adds, But they reasoned with themselves. For had they replied that it was from heaven, the question was inevitable, Why then were ye not baptized by John? But should they reply that it was an invention of human device, and had in it nothing divine, they feared a tumult among the people. For all the assembled multitudes had received John's baptism, and held him accordingly for a Prophet. This godless party therefore make answer, and by a seeming humility of speech confessing that they know not, turned to hide their insidious designs. And they answered Jesus, and said, We know not. In saying that they knew not, they lied; and it might have followed upon their answering thus, that the Lord also should say, I know not; but truth cannot lie, and therefore it follows, And he said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things. This shews that they knew, but would not answer, and that He also knew, but would not answer, because they would not speak what they knew.

ORIGEN. But someone will say in opposition to this, that it was absurd to ask by what authority Jesus did these things. For that it could not be that He would answer, that He did these by the Devil's authority; and He would not tell them as it truly was, that He did them by His own power. If it should be said, that the rulers put this question to Him in order to deter Him from His proceedings; as when we say to one who is dealing with what is ours in a way which we do not like, we say to him, Who bade thee do this? meaning to deter him from what he is so doing;—if it is to be taken so, what means Christ's answer, Do you tell Me this, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Perhaps therefore, the place should be understood as follows. There are in the general two opposite powers, one on the side of God, the other on the side of the Devil; but of particular powers there are many; for it was not one and the same power that wrought in all the Prophets to enable them to do miracles, but one in these, another in those; and, it may be, for lesser things a lesser power, for greater things a greater power. The Chief Priests had seen Jesus working many miracles, whereupon they desired to know the special degree and properties of that power which wrought in Him. For others who have wrought miracles wrought them at first in one power, and afterwards when more advanced in another and greater power; but the Saviour wrought all in one power, that which He received of the Father. But because they were not worthy to hear such mysteries, therefore He gives them no answer, but on the contrary put a question to them.

From Ancient Christian Commentary on Scriptures:

21:23 Who Gave You This Authority?

The Pharisees Confront Jesus.

Hilary of Poitiers: Prior to this, the Pharisees had seen many things more worthy to be called great miracles, but now they were deeply troubled and asked Jesus to identify the authority by which he performed these works. The great mystery of the future is included in the consequences of present deeds. They felt the urge for special questioning, then, because the prefiguration of every danger was made known in this event. The Lord replied that he would tell them by what authority he did these works if only they would also reply to his question about whether they considered John the Baptist to have come from heaven or from man. They hesitated while pondering the dangers of responding. If they confessed John to have come from heaven, they would be convicted by that very confession for not believing in the authority of a heavenly witness. They were afraid to say that he was merely from man, however, because of the large crowd of people who believed John to be a prophet. So they answered that they did not know (they did in fact know him to be from heaven) because they feared that they might be convinced by the truth of their own confession. But they told the truth about themselves, even though it was their intention to deceive; it was only through their infidelity that they did not know John the Baptist to be from heaven. And they could not have known that John the Baptist was from man, because he was not. On Matthew 21.10.

21:24–25 From Where Did John’s Baptism Come?

21:26–27 We Do Not Know

Neither Will I Tell You.

Jerome: In answering Jesus that they did not know, the chief priests and elders lied. Consequently it would have been appropriate for the Lord to respond by saying, “Neither do I know.” The truth cannot lie, however, so he replied instead, “Neither will I tell you.” By this he shows both that they knew the answer but were unwilling to say it and that he also knows the answer but will not speak it because they remained silent. Immediately, then, he tells a parable designed to convince them of their own sinfulness and of the necessity that the kingdom of God be transferred to the Gentiles. Commentary on Matthew 3.21.27.